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PROVISIONAL PROPOSITIONS FOR CHRISTIANS
PARTICIPATING IN URBAN POLITICAL SITUATIONS
MARKED BY DECENTRALIZED LEGAL AUTHORITY AND POLITICAL POWER

by

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PREFACE

One of the common failings of many contemporary treatments of Christian ethics is a lack of concern for explicitly stating the presuppositions and hermeneutical principles informing the study. The end result is a stringing together of a series of comments on current ethical dilemmas and social problems. While this kaleidoscopic approach is sometimes helpful, one is often at a loss to know the presuppositions upon which the judgments made in the problem-centered comments are based. Albert Terrill Rasmussen's book, Christian Ethics, is one of the best examples of this non-systematic problem-oriented approach to explaining the work of the discipline of Christian ethics.

Hoping to avoid the errors of this approach, presuppositions and hermeneutics have been discussed at length in this essay. An effort has been made to construct an outline of a plausible defense of a contextual position not so popular and novel as it was a few short years ago. The attempt has been made to develop and expand this older form of contextualism and relate it to several current debates in the field of Christian ethics. A number of the implications of this position for the church's decision-making process concerning urban socio-political issues are outlined.

Although the essay exhibits a genuine interest in certain debates now taking place in the area of Christian social ethics, its primary intention is interdisciplinary in nature. It seeks to relate insights from the theological discipline of Christian ethics to certain information and theories provided by the secular field of political science. Above all, the work seeks to give guidance to Christians involved in urban political situations marked by decentralized legal authority and political power.

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CHAPTER I

LEVELS OF ETHICAL DISCOURSE AND AN EVALUATION OF RADICAL CONTEXTUALISM

I. Levels of Discourse

There are four levels of moral and ethical discourse. The first, the expressive-evocation level, is characterized by an unreflective moral comment that expresses feelings of indignation and disapproval or acceptance and approval. At the moral level, the reflective question begins to emerge, for here men ask, "What ought I do in this situation? Is that, which I admire so much, really good?" Reasons are given for the choices that men make; reference is made to rules in order to justify moral judgments. The discourse on this level is essentially practical in a sense which does not derogate "practicality" to expediency. The third, or ethical level, is the one on which questions are raised about the rules or considerations that justify a particular judgment. "Can the rules or reasons by which I have justified a particular decision really be defended?" For Christians, the ethical question on this level becomes, "On what grounds are the expectations of the Christian community to be accepted as normative?" The post-ethical level raises the question, "Why be moral or ethical?" It is here that the offering of good reasons finds its limits,

and an element enters of commitment made in freedom.¹

This pattern is helpful in defining the scope of this essay. The concerns of the essay are confined, in the main, to the moral and ethical levels.² The procedure here will be to move from the ethical level to the moral level of discourse. That is to say, the first concern is with the question, "On what grounds are the expectations of the Christian community to be accepted as normative?" This question, of course, implies an understanding of Christian ethical expectations. This understanding will be made explicit in Chapter II.

II. The New Realism

The second concern is with the more practical question, "What ought I do in this situation?" Here the essay will reflect a growing concern in America over the past few decades for accurate analysis of that which is actually taking place in the world in which Christians act, so that their moral conduct can be more realistic and responsible. The realism which is sought is not only

¹Henry David Aiken, "Levels of Moral Discourse, Ethics, LXII (July, 1952), p. 235; James M. Gustafson, "Context Versus Principles," Harvard Theological Review, LVIII (April 1965), 174.

²The terms morals and ethics will be more fully distinguished and defined in Chapter II.

that of a critical assessment of the limitations of man in his finitude and sin. It is a realism about that which is actually occurring and thus about where the pliable points (the interstices in human society) are in which Christians can act and from which can come some of the desired effects or consequences. The responsibility which is sought in the new realism is in relation to spheres of activity already existing.

In terms of the essay's concern for urban political structures, the new realism insists that if one wishes to act out of ethical intentions in the political sphere of life, he must know the context of city politics with as much accuracy and insight as possible.³ If one seeks to affect the social morality and ethical behavior of a local

³The term city politics as used here is defined in its broadest sense. In the context of its use in this essay, the term politics does not mean simply the seeking and holding of electoral office, but rather all civic action directed toward controversial goals. City politics is defined as the study of the urban political community. The subject matter of the study of city politics is understood to include, among other things, the variety of urban governmental forms and constitutions, the relationships between governmental organizations and entities operating in a given city, the relationships between non-governmental forms of human association and organization which exert or have the potential to exert power and influence in a given urban situation, and the interaction between non-governmental (public) agencies, authorities, and governments. The urban political community includes all these factors and relationships. What is meant by city politics, wholistically, is the entire decision-making process by which controversial decisions are made and goals pursued.

community, he must know that social context, its power structure, its mores, its institutional arrangements, its population movements and so forth.

The essay will reflect the new realism's concern for context. It will describe a particular context of moral and ethical decision; that is, those urban contexts marked by decentralized legal authority and actual political power. The essay will conclude with a set of provisional propositions (following J. H. Oldham and John C. Bennett) for the guiding and judging of efforts to centralize legal authority and political power in American cities. The point will be made that the decentralization of power and authority characteristic of many American cities must be overcome or set aside if these cities are to be able to meet creatively the problems facing them. The function of these provisional propositions for the Christian church is to provide her with a point of reference which will assist Christians in making ethical judgments concerning specific methods and schemes of centralizing power and authority in cities and for community decision making in general.

III. A Perspective Within the New Realism

Within the contextualism of the new realism, there are two main schools of thought. The use of the term provisional propositions in the last sub-section indicates that the essay will be written from the perspective of one

of the schools. As opposed to the contextualism of Paul Lehmann, Albert Rasmussen, Alexander Miller, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Joseph Sittler, it will be maintained that there are ethical norms given in the Christian revelation which can provide the foundation upon which provisional propositions can be constructed, and that these propositions can more or less give common guidance to the involvement of Christians in social change and political processes. In the creation of these proximate norms, John C. Bennett, J. H. Oldham, and Reinhold Niebuhr will be followed in their efforts to establish theoretical states of affairs which approximate Christian ethical norms. The propositions will be created in tension with the discrepancy that exists between an ethical norm which cannot be easily applied on the one hand, and the condition of man, the sinner, which causes the complexity of ethical dilemmas on the other hand. The assumption here is that the church should attempt to provide guidelines or provisional definitions of goals which will help Christians relate transcendent Christian ethics to given times, places, and situations.

The provisional proposition concept is not unlike the notion of middle axioms in the writings of Bennett and Oldham. Provisional political and social propositions are more concrete than a universal ethical principle and less

specific than a program which includes specific suggestions of legislation and political strategy.⁴ Oldham's description of what he understood the term middle axioms to mean will help to make clear what is meant by the term provisional propositions:

They are an attempt to define the directions in which, in a particular state of society, Christian faith must express itself. They are not binding for all time, but are provisional definitions of the type of behavior required of Christians in a given period and in given circumstances.⁵

One pole of the dialectic is contextual awareness, or in terms of this essay, an acute awareness of what is actually going on in urban politics. The other pole is the revelation provided by Christian faith of norms which both judge and guide responses and activities in the urban political context. The provisional propositions are intended to operate in between the two poles of the dialectical polarity. They are understood as provisional goals which will serve to condition and inform urban political activity. In no way are they to be understood as efforts to create a theoretical form to be considered as the only possible Christian way to centralize authority

⁴John C. Bennett, Christian Ethics and Social Policy (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), p. 77.

⁵W. A. Visser 't Hooft and J. H. Oldham, The Church and Its Function in Society (Chicago: Willett-Clark, 1937), p. 210.

and power in all urban situations. The provisional propositions are provisional and are, thus, subject to change and revision.

Alvin Pitcher offers a convenient summary of the contextual perspective out of which this essay will be written:

A Christian ethic, as any ethic, must provide us with an understanding of the character out of which Christian action emerges and of the structure or pattern of Christian action itself. It must describe and give guidance for the character or disposition that provides the power for action and for apprehending the actuality of the situation or context. But, at the same time, it must provide content for goals and patterns of action.⁶

IV. The Contribution and Problems of Radical Contextualism

The radical contextualist argument goes or runs that the Bible presents a profound analysis of human nature and the true hope for human salvation. It also calls one to a life of obedience, not to oneself, but to Jesus Christ. However, the argument goes on: the Bible is of almost no value in spelling out concretely just what constitutes obedience to Christ. The Christian continues to live in a complex and sinful society far different from that of the Biblical writers, and consequently their ethical imperatives are quite irrelevant to twentieth century man. What has the

⁶Alvin Pitcher, "A New Era in Protestant Social Ethics," Chicago Theological Register, XLVIII (February, 1958), 8.

New Testament to say to the involved and complex problems of unemployment and inflation, of international politics and of cold wars?⁷

For the most part, the radical contextualists are saying that the Christian faith provides a disposition of responsible concern for the neighbor and the Protestant principle. The assumption is that a study of the situation will provide a pragmatic program of action. Insofar as there is anything new in this school, it is the emphasis upon the church as the context within which the apprehension of what is demanded in any concrete situation is judged to be an adequate or inadequate response. Essentially, the guiding image is faith plus facts.⁸

The major value of radical contextualism is its warning to Christians against the dangers of ethical legalism. Among these dangers is the negative and restrictive character of legalistic morality, its propensity to stifle individuality and creativity, its tendency to fall into sterile externalism, and its inability to secure obedience. Further, the radical contextualists have performed an important service in emphasizing the close relationship

⁷David Little, "Principalities and Power and the Christian Ethic," Union Seminary Quarterly Review, XIII (March, 1958), 21.

⁸Pitcher, op. cit., p. 10.

between faith and ethics, in calling attention to the complexity of the ethical situation and the ethical aspects of economic, political, and social relationships, and in emphasizing the dynamic character of human relationships and human needs. None of these insights, however, necessitates the denial of an important place for provisional propositions in the ethical life.⁹

Rather than attempting further generalization about the general position assumed by the radical contextualists, the procedure will be to point out some of the dangers and problems involved in the position of one of the leading exponents of this view, Professor Paul Lehmann.

Lehmann calls for a Koinonia ethic.¹⁰ One discovers God's will for him in the Koinonia (that is, the Christian fellowship). Starting from the concrete reality of the church, Lehmann's ethic has three main characteristics. First, it is always concrete and contextual. It "regards the concrete complex of the actual situation out of which the ethical problem arises as itself ethically

⁹E. C. Gardner, "The Role of Law and Moral Principles in the Ethical Life," Religion in Life, XXVII (Spring, 1959), 242.

¹⁰Paul L. Lehmann, "The Foundation and Pattern of Christian Behavior," Christian Faith and Social Action, ed, John A. Hutchison (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953); Paul L. Lehmann, Ethics in a Christian Context (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

significant."¹¹ An adequate response to the situation can take place only in the context of the concrete reality of the church.¹² Second, it is an indicative rather than imperative ethic. It begins with what is, that is, with the Koinonia which God has established and in which he is acting to provide a pattern for all Christian behavior.¹³ It is social rather than individualistic. God is bringing in the Kingdom. "The drive and the direction of God's activity are social."¹⁴ The Christian ethic, then, is said to be concrete and contextual, beginning with the concrete facts involved in a specific ethical situation rather than with absolute moral laws or principles. The Christian ethic, being indicative rather than imperative, gives primary attention to what is, as opposed to what ought to be.¹⁵

¹¹Lehmann, Christian Faith and Social Action, p. 105.

¹²Ibid., p. 107, "The empirical reality of the church is a basic fact as the laboratory of the living word."

¹³Ibid., pp. 107-9.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 109.

¹⁵Lehmann, Ethics in a Christian Context, p. 347. "Christian ethics in the tradition of Reformation seeks to provide an analysis of the environment of decision in which the principle foundations and preceptual directives of behavior are displaced by contextual foundations and parabolic directives. In a word, the environment of decision is the context for the ethical reality of conscience."

In this Koinonia ethic the "whole complex of man's pragmatic choices is drawn into the orbit of what God has set up and is setting up in the world."¹⁶ The will of God is defined as

forgiveness and justice rather than love. This does not mean that the will of God is something else than love. It means, on the contrary, that the concrete reality of love in the Koinonia in the world is forgiveness and justice and reconciliation.¹⁷

The "story of God's ways with man in the world recounted in the Bible" provides the basis for understanding the "relationship between God and man, and man and man which takes concrete form in the existing Koinonia."¹⁸

Lehmann attempts to avoid what he sees as two pitfalls of discussing the Christian ethic simply in terms of self-giving love (agape). On the one hand, he sees that some ethical thinkers have moved from love, as precept or law, to practical decisions that were in reality made on purely pragmatic bases or on the basis of "some value system in which Christian love has a difficult time eking out a discrete existence."¹⁹ He sees the same result occurring when one moves from love defined as "an attitude of benevolence, sympathy, or mutuality."²⁰ He hopes to

¹⁶Lehmann, "The Foundation and Pattern of Christian Behavior," Christian Faith and Social Action, pp. 111-12.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 112-13.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 108.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 111.

²⁰Ibid.

avoid the problem of filling the Christian ethical norm love with practical content which is in fact drawn from sources only very vaguely, if at all, connected with love, as understood in the light of God's action in Christ.

There is little doubt that as a protest against legalism and as a reminder that Christian love gets its meaning from the agape of God revealed most fully in Christ, Lehmann's emphasis upon the contextual character of Christian ethics is a valid one.²¹ It can also be said that he convinces the reader anew that the Christian is no individualistic Robinson Crusoe, but, rather, is one who is a part of a fellowship of believers which surrounds him with fellow pilgrims among whom there is mutual support in meeting the burdens and temptations of the world.²² Lehmann's restatement of the Protestant principle, as it relates to Christian ethics is also helpful.²³

²¹Gardner, op. cit., p. 238.

²²Albert Terrill Rasmussen, Christian Social Ethics (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1956), p. 7.

²³Lehmann, "The Foundation and Pattern of Christian Behavior," Christian Faith and Social Action, p. 110. The following statement by Lehmann is a good illustration of the way in which he restates the Protestant principle: "The Koinonia is the outpost of God's judgment upon every social pattern and structure which seeks to preserve and to justify itself by the idolatry of the status quo. And the Koinonia is the outpost of God's renewal, establishing new patterns and structure, commensurate with God's new possibilities of living on the other side of those which are played out. The ethical reality of the Christian life

As E. C. Gardner has pointed out, one of the primary failures of Lehmann's Koinonia ethic is that it limits the revelation of God's will too sharply to the Christian fellowship and for this reason, like Paul's ethic, it is largely an ethic of the Christian fellowship. It fails to provide adequately for the co-operation of Christians with non-Christians in meeting the problems which all men meet in common.²⁴ In a pluralistic society this is a most serious deficiency. In American cities this is a disaster. America's larger cities are among the world's most extreme examples of social pluralism.²⁵ Gardner is correct when he insists that Lehmann must give more attention to an analysis of the nature of man as a moral and ethical being and to the significance of natural revelation.²⁶

is being, in fact and in anticipation, ready for God's next move."

²⁴Gardner, op. cit., p. 239.

²⁵Martin E. Marty, Babylon By Choice (New York: Friendship Press, 1965), p. 26. The dwindling proportion of Christians in the world certainly should prompt us to seriously consider the need for an ethic adequate to provide a basis for co-operation between Christians and non-Christians in meeting common social and political problems. Martin Marty tells us that the diminishing percentage of Christians in the world's population can be summarized in the following generalization: "Today's young or middle-aged adult was born in a world that was nominally just short of one-third Christian. If he fulfills his life expectancy he may leave a world that is one-sixth Christian, or hardly more than that."

²⁶Gardner, Loc. cit.

What is being suggested is that Lehmann's definition of Christian ethics must be expanded in such a way as to seriously take into account the pluralistic American context. Lehmann states that Christian ethics can be defined as the disciplined reflection upon the question and its answer: What am I, as a believer in Jesus Christ and as a member of his church, to do? He further states that "Christian ethics is oriented toward revelation and not toward morality."²⁷ At a later point in the essay, there will be agreement with Lehmann that Christian ethics are ultimately defined and determined by revelation as reflected upon in the context of the church. Here it is merely suggested that any initial definition of Christian ethics that takes pluralistic social and political situations seriously must include an additional dimension. That is to say, the definition should run as follows: Christian ethics can be defined as the disciplined reflection upon the question and its answer: What am I, as a believer in Jesus Christ, as a member of his church, and as a citizen of a pluralistic society, to do? Like it or not, we, as Americans, are members of a pluralistic society and, in a larger context, we are citizens of a world which seems to be moving toward a single civilization of tremendous similarity and yet of

²⁷Lehmann, Ethics in a Christian Context, p. 45.

striking dissimilarities. The new civilization will apparently be marked by pluralism within commonality.²⁸ The new coming civilization and the present pluralism of American cities require that the dimension suggested here be a part of definitions of Christian ethics.

Lehmann, both in Ethics in a Christian Context and in a well-known Christian Century article, has attempted to find ways to break out of the Christian circle of understandings and definitions by developing what he calls Christian humanism. Here he seeks to shape an ethic which is in accord with God's freedom in his humanizing work for men. The ethic he seeks is one that delineates the Christian participation in the world as one which coincides with that which God is doing for man in a very particular set of events.²⁹ Borrowing the term from Paul Tillich, he states that the Christian is to have a theonomous conscience immediately sensitive to the freedom of God to do in the always changing human situation what his humanizing aims and purposes require. The theonomous conscience is governed and directed by the freedom of God alone.³⁰

As James Gustafson puts it, "he finds in Koinonia a coinciding of the response of Christians to what the community

²⁸Huston Smith, "Religious Pluralism and the Ethos of a World Civilization," Nexus 23, VIII (February, 1965), 35.

²⁹Gustafson, op. cit., p. 181.

³⁰Lehmann, Ethics in a Christian Context, pp. 358-59.

knows God has done and is doing."³¹

In order to know how God is acting in the world to keep man human, one must have an idea of what is human and not human. Lehmann states that only in the context of the story of salvation as given in the Bible can one really know what is and is not human. "The semantics of the human and the story of salvation are said to belong together."³² To know God's chief purpose for man and man's chief purpose is to understand the Bible in the context of Koinonia.³³

Here it can be seen that Lehmann talks about man almost entirely in terms of definitions and understandings which have their origin in the special revelation in Jesus Christ and which have their context of meaning in the Christian community. It would be very helpful if Lehmann could discuss the term human at least partially in terms of natural or general revelation. If this were done, he might be able to (a) derive the determining content of his humanism from the special revelation in Jesus Christ, and (b) yet develop a possible common meeting place in the

³¹Gustafson, op. cit., p. 182.

³²Paul L. Lehmann, "On Keeping Human Life Human," Christian Century, LXXXI (October 21, 1964), 1299.

³³Ibid., ". . . to be human is to be what God made and purposed man to be, and to exhibit the fact that God's chief purpose and man's chief purpose are the same."

term human for Christians and non-Christians by discussing the term partially in the context of natural or general revelation. As it is now, Lehmann has no bridge from the Christian communities' understanding of what it is to be human to non-Christian understandings of man's humanity. Lehmann never really takes seriously non-Christian anthropology. Because of this, it can be said that Lehmann's formulation of the Christian ethic is an ethic for Christian community that fails to provide adequately for common ethical discussion between Christians and non-Christians. It will be suggested in this essay that both the anthropology and the anthropological method of Reinhold Niebuhr provide the bridge absent in Lehmann's work between Christian and non-Christian estimates and definitions of man and his situation.

Unless we, as churchmen, can form provisional propositions which are related to Christian ethical norms in a rational way that can be discussed and debated among Christians and with non-Christians, how can we hope to have meaningful moral and ethical discussion within the church among Christians and outside the church with non-Christians?

Is it not correct to suggest that, although one may not begin with absolute precepts and laws, one can really be aided by Koinonia in his effort to discover God's will for himself only insofar as the experience and witness of

the Koinonia is generalized in terms of precepts, principles, or propositions which can, more or less, be applied to new situations? Such formulations of love are marked by dimensions of abstraction and will inevitably fail to do justice to the diversity and complexity of particular concrete situations; but they are useful in much the same way that any other kind of generalization is useful. That is to say, they offer initial direction and some criterion for judgment.³⁴

In spite of Lehmann's intention to bridge the gap between the will of God, theologically understood, and the concrete human situation, pragmatically understood, he provides no real new alternative. Alvin Pitcher sums up this point in the following statement:

Although he points to the Christian community as the source for the pattern of Christian behavior, what pattern is meant, beyond that of moving toward the neighbor with concern for his needs, is not clear. The only new element is the demand for pragmatic decision from within the context of the church.³⁵

As has been pointed out, Lehmann does remind us that justice requires the overthrowing of existing structures of power and pretension while others are built up. But this is, in effect, simply another statement of the Protestant principle. Surely, students of Christian ethics have a more constructive role to play than that of merely the

³⁴Gardner, op. cit.

³⁵Pitcher, op. cit.

warning against or the pointing out of real or potential forms of idolatry. Justice does, to be sure, involve the breaking down and overthrowing of idolatrous and outmoded structures of power and cultural and social patterns. But it must be remembered that the overthrow of such structures and patterns would also bring injustice as well as invite chaos. This is not to say that there are not some structures so evil and profane as to necessitate their radical overthrow. Rather, it is to say that in many cases the cause of justice is better served by the transformation or conversion of existing structures, so that the good in them would be preserved while the evil is being purged away. It is also to suggest that Christian ethicists should be expected to give guidance and direction to Christians involved in such transforming enterprises.³⁶

It would seem that Lehmann and other radical contextualists have abdicated responsibility for giving substantive ethical and moral guidance to Christians in particular situations. At the most, according to Lehmann, Christian faith contributes faith, or the disposition of love, concern, and responsibility, and the Protestant principle. This being the case, it would appear that, practically speaking, Christians are to look to the social sciences for whatever concrete direction they can hope to

³⁶Ibid.

receive. Is it not possible that, ultimately, Lehmann takes the social sciences much more seriously than he takes theology?³⁷ It would seem that Lehmann, with his emphasis upon faith or Christian character without concern for developing provisional Christian understandings of specific goals and patterns of action, has developed a justifiable antilegalism into an unjustifiable anti-nominalism.³⁸

To be more specific, this writer is in agreement with Alvin Pitcher when he suggests that Lehmann and other radical contextualists (especially Rasmussen and Miller) have given up the task of providing ethical leadership and guidance for Christians in particular situations:

- a. By restricting the contribution of Christian faith in the area of social ethics to the provision of a disposition of a responsible concern for the neighbor;
- b. By not moving beyond the Protestant principle;
- c. By being content to analyze the social situation as social scientists without attempting a theological interpretation of such analyses;
- d. By emphasizing faith or Christian character without concern for a Christian understanding of patterns of actions and goals; and
- e. By failing to seek new images which will offer direction for our time.³⁹

³⁷Ibid., p. 13.

³⁸Ibid., p. 14.

³⁹Pitcher, op. cit., p. 11.

Something more is needed than the suggestion that one should immerse himself in the situation in which he lives, and in which God is acting, and then do what appears to be the right thing in faith.⁴⁰ It will be maintained in this essay that the development of theological insight to provide the basis for understanding man in society must, in addition to the knowledge of context provided by the social sciences, include:

- a. Critical assessment of the limitations of man in his finitude and sin;
- b. Conception of man's essential nature and true end; and
- c. Formulation of provisional propositions and images by which man can understand, guide, and judge his individual and corporate behavior.⁴¹

V. The Need for Abstraction

As has been stated, this essay seeks to provide provisional propositions for the guidance of Christians in a particular social and political situation. The whole enterprise is informed by the assumption that while there is no neat rational substitute for the Biblical sources as

⁴⁰Gustafson, op. cit., p. 175. Gustafson states that the direction offered by what is called the radical contextualism school is to "immerse yourself in the situation in which you live, and in which God is acting, and do what appears to be the right thing in faith."

⁴¹Gardner, op. cit., p. 244.

the primary materials out of which provisional propositions are to be constructed and judged, we must abstract from Biblical materials in a way that will facilitate conversation about modes of social and political behavior and activity within the church, and that will allow for rational and meaningful conversations on the part of Christians with persons outside the church concerning social behavior, issues, and related matters.

There will be those who will insist that abstracting from Biblical materials is, in fact, substituting a philosophical morality for a Biblical ethic. In answer to such criticism, Reinhold Niebuhr will be followed in pointing out the dangers of postulating a sharp division between the Biblical record and man's rational understandings:

It is obviously perilous to the content of the Christian faith and to the interpretation of life to place such (extreme) reliance on the coherences and rationalities, the sequences and harmonies, of nature and reason. But the perils in the other direction are vividly displayed in contemporary as well as older Christian existentialism. The primary peril is that the wisdom of the Gospel is emptied of meaning by setting it into contradiction to the wisdom of the world and denying that the coherences and realms of meaning which the cultural disciplines rightfully analyze and establish have any relation to the Gospel.⁴²

With this charter, Niebuhr has been able to abstract

⁴²Reinhold Niebuhr, "Coherence, Incoherence, and The Christian Faith," Journal of Religion, XXXI (July, 1951), 162.

categories for the discussion of Biblical thought. "His insights are informed by the Bible but are not bound to the language or categories that it employs."⁴³

That the Bible is fundamental for Christian worship and theology is a conviction shared in common by the various Protestant denominations and confessions, even when there is disagreement as to why this is so. Protestants, of course, are not alone in their estimation of the significance and importance of the Bible for Christians. The two other major branches of Christendom--Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic--also affirm that the Bible is sacred scripture and that, in some sense, it is indispensable for the Christian witness.⁴⁴ If there is no substitute for the Biblical sources in the work of the Christian ethical thinker, then we must acknowledge the need for abstraction. Even for the Christian the Bible is very often an alien book about an archaic world. Hendrik Kraemer is acutely aware of this problem of communication between the Bible and the contemporary layman:

We must recognize the unintelligibility of the Bible, not only of its language, its terminology, but also to use a German word, of its Weltbild (picture of the world). This affects people as

⁴³Edward Leroy Long, "The Uses of the Bible in Christian Ethics," Interpretation, XX (April, 1965), 160.

⁴⁴Bernhard W. Anderson, "The Bible," Handbook of Christian Theology (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), p. 35.

antiquated, archaic, unscientific . . . It sounds so strange, so incomprehensible, so distant from their ordinary ways of thinking. It is, at best, to them a "sacral" language, as all sacral language wrapped up in mystery. It is, they think, a book for experts and theologians . . . The decisive point in connection with the breakdown of communication is the dominant trend in modern apperception of the totality of life, which seems to be worlds apart from the Biblical apperception. The last is Chinese to the ordinary man. There is an incompatibility of languages to the extent, it seems, of mutual intranslatability. It seems an insoluble dilemma.⁴⁵

We may not share Kraemer's pessimism concerning a solution, but it would be difficult to contradict his statement of the problem. Many contemporary Christian laymen see little or no direct relationship between their patterns of thought and their ways of reacting to things and the concerns of the Bible. If the Christian layman is alienated from the Biblical sources so necessary to Christian ethical thought and action, how much more alienated is the non-Christian? All this should impress churchmen with the necessity of abstracting from the Biblical materials.

The abstraction necessary for meaningful ethical and moral discussion both within and without the church involves the risk of robbing the Gospel of some of its power, putting forth a reduced Gospel, so that contemporary

⁴⁵Hendrik Kraemer, The Communication of The Christian Faith (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), pp. 93-95.

man may be able to grasp it without so much difficulty. But to give up the longing for the whole truth, and to fasten on the limited truth which Christians can more or less see clearly may enable churchmen, for all the risks, to speak with meaning and reasonable accuracy to current situations which call for both analysis and direction.⁴⁶

⁴⁶William Hamilton, The New Essence of Christianity (New York: Association Press, 1961), pp. 14-15.

CHAPTER II

"BRIDGE BUILDING" BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND NON-CHRISTIANS IN PLURALISTIC SOCIETIES

I. Overlapping Moral Awareness as a Basis for Social and Political Pluralism

It was maintained in the first chapter that Christian ethics in our time should be defined as the disciplined reflection upon the question and its answer: What am I, as a believer in Jesus Christ, as a member of his church, and as a citizen of a pluralistic society, to do? Further, it has been pointed out that Americans are members of a pluralistic society, and in a larger context are citizens of a world which seems to be moving toward a single civilization of tremendous similarity and yet of striking dissimilarities. In this chapter the aim is to show the necessity of efforts to seek some sort of moral and ethical consensus as a means by which to bind together the component parts of our pluralistic society.

While American churchmen do not want to be guilty of seeking an American religion which may begin as a common denominator of the historic faiths but which becomes in practice a substitute religion, general moral agreements must constantly be sought among the various segments of this pluralistic society. Will Herberg, Martin Marty,

Peter Berger, and others have pointed out the dangers of the development of a vague theism which provides the thread with which to bind together the American patchwork quilt. As these critics have made clear, this folk religion tends to provide popular sanctions for conventional, possibly outmoded, and potentially idolatrous social and political forms. This sort of common religion can become nationalistic and self-righteous in ways devoid of any emphasis upon the transcendent judgment of God. Nonetheless, we must not be blinded to the fact that some common moral agreements and understandings are necessary for a pluralistic society not to be balkanized into warring principalities. It must be accepted that such agreements are possible, otherwise the hope of relative peace and stability for pluralistic societies could not be entertained.

Theologically put, this means that the notion of general revelation cannot be done away with, even if an overly rationalistic natural theology is dismissed. The relative success of the pluralistic American experiment is not wholly due to sources specifically related to Christian revelation. There is, to use John Bennett's term, a broader faith which undergirds the whole American enterprise and without which it would not be possible. This broader faith has classical sources which are both

Christian and non-Christian.¹ As H. Richard Niebuhr has pointed out, our notions, as Christian Americans, of goodness, responsibility, duty, diety, and so forth, represent the demands of our western, Hellenized human reason as well as social memories which are not connected with the name and life of Christ.² Bennett sums up this point in the following paragraph:

These classical roots have their own independence even though they were given Christian baptism and in some measure transformed by the Gospel. But their independence in Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and the Stoics is a fact of great importance about man's capacity for moral knowledge apart from Judaeo-Christian influence.³

Whereas, like Richard Niebuhr, one can assert that these non-Christian contributions can be and have been transformed and fulfilled by Christ, it is impossible to deny their contribution to the well-being of our common life.

In this section the intention has been to point out that there has been an overlapping of moral awareness and conviction which has promoted the relative stability and peace, characteristic of the pluralistic American

¹John C. Bennett, Christians and the State (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 11.

²H. Richard Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation (New York: Macmillan, 1941), p. 182.

³Bennett, op. cit., p. 14.

enterprise.⁴ The following statement by John Bennett illustrates how it is possible to speak of overlapping moral awareness as necessary to a functioning pluralistic society and still emphasize the grounding of Christian ethical and moral attitudes in the peculiar Christian revelation:

This conception of the overlapping of the moral awareness and convictions of Christians and non-Christians allows the Christian ethic to have its own grounding in revelation, its own motivation in response to the love of God, its own refinement and expansion through the sensitivity that is the fruit of Christian love. It allows for parallel contexts of faith which support the ethical awareness and convictions of non-Christians.⁵

In this chapter an outline will be given of two

⁴Murray Friedman, "The White Liberal's Retreat," Harpers, CCXXIX (January, 1963), 63.

For example, the 1954 Supreme Court decision concerning school desegregation was, in large measure, made possible because a significant portion of the diverse population of the United States had come to believe that segregation was morally indefensible. This consensus is described in the January, 1963, Harper's article by Murray Friedman, "The White Liberal's Retreat." Friedman points out that in the forties and fifties various sorts of liberals, intellectuals, and many varieties of middle-class whites came to believe that the elimination of segregation was the central domestic problem facing the nation. The 1954 Supreme Court decision is seen as a high water mark in the Negro-liberal white alliance. A civil rights revolution was set in motion by the 1954 decision; and, aided by a sympathetic white community, the American Negro began to seek entry into areas of American life previously closed to him. This revolution was peacefully launched and supported, at least in part, because of what we have called overlapping moral awareness.

⁵Bennett, op. cit., p. 15.

points of departure from which churchmen can build bridges from the Christian circle of understandings to non-Christian moral and ethical sensitivity, and thereby discover areas of moral agreement. The basic assumption is that Christian ethics are ultimately grounded in and determined by the peculiar and specific Christian revelation, but that they can be verified to some degree outside the Christian revelation.

II. The Role of Decision and Hermeneutics in Christian Ethics

When one views the infinite number of ethical values and criteria of judgment championed by man, he must conclude that Christian ethical judgments are ultimately decisions, not conclusions. From the point of view of pure reason, it must be confessed that the practical reason (Kant's moral faculty) works in a style as arbitrary as the leap of faith. Joseph Fletcher summarizes this point in the following statement:

Just as we cannot by reason alone build philosophically from doubt to the side of faith, from hope to certainty, or from nature to grace, so we cannot build a logical bridge from facts to values, and from is-ness to ought-ness. Indeed, this applies as much to aesthetics as to ethics, that is, to art values as to moral values. Every kind of value proposition is a faith proposition. The leap of affirmation is essential.⁶

⁶Joseph Fletcher, "Six Propositions: The New Look in Christian Ethics," Harvard Divinity Bulletin, XXIV (October, 1959), 7.

This point will become more distinct as moral behavior is distinguished from ethical behavior. Moral behavior, as used here, refers to behavior according to custom and common practice. Ethical behavior refers to behavior according to reason, that is, according to the presuppositions and criteria of conduct ascertainable by reflective analysis. Insofar as the presuppositions and criteria of conduct can be ascertained by theological analysis, Christian ethics can be distinguished from other types of ethical thinking, for instance, non-Christian (that is, philosophical) ethics.⁷ Paul Lehmann helps to further define Christian ethics in the following quotation:

Christian ethics is that part of theology which undertakes to state and explain the presuppositions and the criteria of Christian behavior. This is a methodological definition, arrived at by asking about the field of inquiry and the method of getting at what is going on in the field.⁸

Christian ethics is distinguished from other forms of ethics by its orientation around the revelation given in Jesus Christ. In its broadest sense, this means that the source of the norm pole of the norm/context dialectic

⁷Paul L. Lehmann, "The Foundation and Pattern of Christian Behavior," Christian Faith and Social Action, ed, John A. Hutchison (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 97.

⁸Ibid., p. 98.

mentioned in the previous chapter is Scripture. All that we know today concerning God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ comes to us from the Bible. There is no dependable witness to Jesus that has come to us from contemporary secular sources.⁹ Men know Jesus Christ by the witness of his followers. What we are really saying is that the Apostolic Age, or the first, second, and third centuries, is the source of the norms by which we, as Christians, judge ethical and moral decisions. The Apostolic Age, as John Knox points out, is something more than simply the first period in church history. It is more important as the age which stands next to the event of Jesus Christ. Because of this fact, this age has authority and normative significance in the church in all the ages.¹⁰

When Christians reflect on ethical decisions in the light of Jesus Christ, they are in fact reflecting through the medium of Scripture and the vision of the Apostolic Age. Especially in a pluralistic society, they have made a decision to reflect in this fashion. This decision sets their ethical reflection apart from non-Christian reflection. Christian ethical reflection is that reflection

⁹Holmes Rolston, The Bible in Christian Teaching (Richmond, John Knox Press, 1962), p. 20.

¹⁰John Knox, The Early Church and the Coming Great Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1955), p. 18.

according to the presuppositions and criteria of conduct ascertainable by reflective analysis dependent upon a prior decision in favor of the revelation in Jesus Christ. The leap of affirmation is essential to this distinctive kind of reflective analysis.

Christian ethical behavior is distinguished from conventional or moral behavior, at least in theory, by the fact that, to borrow A. T. Rasmussen's phrase, the Christian existence is "life under continuous divine criticism."¹¹ No value system or pattern of behavior is ever understood to be beyond the judgment of God. This rugged life can never fully trust social and political values and conventions. Any morality is ultimately an object of suspicion. There are no final victories or realized utopias. Rasmussen sums up this point in the following statement:

Every outcome must be accepted as both failure and victory: failure in that we have failed to be fully responsive to God and to the welfare of others; victory in that God has failed our biased plans and restrained us all, both weak and strong, in ways we cannot understand. We must recognize in faith that our appraisals of victories or defeats are not God's appraisals; our ways are never His ways.¹²

¹¹Albert Terrill Rasmussen, Christian Social Ethics (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1956), p. 78.

¹²Ibid.

To say that Christian ethics are distinguished by an orientation around the revelation in Jesus Christ and that we know this revelation through Scripture is to say a great deal and yet not to say much at all. Such statements do not solve the hermeneutical problems inherent in any understanding of Christian ethics. All Christian thinking, including Christian ethical thought, involves hermeneutics, either implicitly or explicitly.

Although hermeneutics refers generally to the study and formulation of principles of literary interpretation, the word has come to be reserved for that branch of Christian theology which has to do with the principles of Biblical interpretation. One cannot think as a Christian without presupposing a certain way of understanding the Bible. The relation between Christian faith and the text of the Bible is too complex to allow a simple derivation of the faith from the text or of the text from the faith.⁵⁹

Because it is impossible to simply move from text to faith, doctrine, and so forth, one cannot hope to move in a single line unencumbered by hermeneutical considerations from Biblical texts to an outline of Christian ethics. Hermeneutics in ethics, as in the formulation of principles of Biblical interpretation, involves abstraction and the risk of oversimplification. But, as was suggested in the previous chapter, this is a risk that must be taken.

¹³Paul L. Lehmann, Ethics in a Christian Context (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 26.

III. A Valid Approach to the Ordering of Christian Ethics

Discussing Christian ethics in terms of the socio-ethical problem raised by the gap between the world of sinful power conflicts and God's law of love (agape) is, within the context of the concerns of this essay, both helpful and defensible (a) because agape as the law of life is at the heart of the Gospel; (b) because the law of love is the criterion of man's essential manhood and not a heteronomously imposed alien norm; and (c) because power-seeking that is self-interest oriented and sinful can be recognized and interpreted as a seemingly permanent factor in human behavior by both Christian and non-Christian alike, and thereby can provide a common point of discussion and debate between the Christian and non-Christian components of a pluralistic society.

To date, the classic study of the idea of agape in the New Testament is Anders Nygren's Agape and Eros. As Walter Harrelson has pointed out, one of the most obvious and important shortcomings of Nygren's study is its failure to take adequate account of the Old Testament conception of love.¹⁴ By outlining both the commonality and difference between Old and New Testament understandings of love, it

¹⁴Walter Harrelson, "The Idea of Agape in the New Testament," Journal of Religion, XXXI (July, 1951), 173.

can be seen that the ethical norm of agape, revealed by Christ on the cross, is at the heart of the Gospel.

Although it is not possible to discuss in detail the various Old Testament understandings of love, one can point to the classic reference of Yahweh's love for Israel:

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the Lord loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharoah, King of Egypt.¹⁵

Commenting on this passage as it related to Nygren's understanding of the uniqueness of the New Testament understanding of love as agape, Harrelson makes the following point:

Here we find Yahweh's love described just about as Nygren describes agape in the New Testament. The love of Yahweh for Israel is spontaneous, "uncaused," creative. It is love for sinful Israel--for Israel was never other than sinful. The contrast which Hygren draws between the Jewish love for the righteous and Jesus' love for the sinner tells us little about the relation between the New Testament and the Old Testament.¹⁶

It will be remembered that Nygren sees the New Testament concept of love as unique in the sense that it is God's spontaneous, uncaused, creative love which creates

¹⁵Deut. 7:7-8 (Revised Standard Version).

¹⁶Harrelson, op. cit., p. 174.

fellowship for man with God. That is to say, there is no quality of worth in the object of God's love which could possibly have evoked agape. Agape is manifested supremely in the cross. For the purposes of this essay, these are the most important elements of his understanding of the uniqueness of the New Testament understanding of agape.

Now, if Harrelson is correct and the New Testament understanding of agape is not quite as unique as Nygren thought it to be, what is the distinctive difference between the Old Testament view of God's love and that of the New Testament? Harrelson discusses the difference in the following way:

The most obvious and the most important difference--in fact, the only significant difference--is the cross The difference is that in the New Testament the purpose of Yahweh with Israel is fulfilled. . . . The New Testament is centered in agape, not because for the first time the nature of God was truly revealed, but because the historic destiny of Israel found its fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth who was the Christ. Here was the love of God which the men of the Covenant had long ago partially experienced, the same love which was present on Sinai in the giving of the Ten Words and the making of the Covenant, the same love of which Hosea, Jeremiah, and the Psalmists spoke. It is Covenant love become a present reality rather than a past experience and a hope for the future. It attained its fullest reality when the disciples remembered the words, "This cup is the New Covenant in my blood" (I Corinthians 11:25).¹⁷

The New Testament usage of agape, then, gathers up the

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 173-74.

meaning of the righteousness, mercy, and love of God expressed in the Old Testament and makes redemptive love the foundation of the Christian understanding of love.¹⁸

With all this said, it should not surprise us that the requirement laid upon man by a Holy God is the complete response and self-giving which is summed up in the two commandments re-emphasized by Jesus:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.¹⁹

In the light of the revelation in Christ, the Christian obligation toward the neighbor is to give the same love which Christ has shown to us. Thus the agape of God, most clearly revealed in the cross, is the foundation and norm of Christian ethical obligation.

Now all of this is helpful if one orders reality from within the Christian circle of understanding, but it is of little value if one does not understand the human situation from this circle of perception. It has already been said that within the context of our social, political, religious, and intellectual pluralism, churchmen must seek out the bases of rational and meaningful conversations

¹⁸Daniel D. Williams, "Love," Handbook of Christian Theology (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), p. 218.

¹⁹Matt. 22:37-40 (Revised Standard Version).

between Christians and persons outside the church concerning what constitutes ethical behavior. In our time, Christians cannot initiate conversation with non-Christians about ethical norms by merely saying, "God says this and so it is!" As Paul Tillich has pointed out, contemporary man increasingly rebels against efforts to impose what appears to be an alien law, religious or secular, on man's mind. The church will be talking only with itself in the future if it attempts to act heteronomously in the area of defining ethical norms.²⁰

Indeed, it appears that talk about God in and of itself is not very well accepted in an increasing number of circles. Contemporary mind-sets seem progressively to be nontheistic by temper. The past three hundred years have seen the gradual change from predominantly theistic to nontheistic perspectives. The deep-seated intellectual conviction that the universe and man are the handiwork of God--with all that this implies--has receded into the background. In its place has emerged the belief that natural laws and processes are ultimate. Increasingly, men are accepting the proposition that there is no final teleological principle, at least none that we are in a position to affirm. In short, it would seem for many that

²⁰Paul Tillich, The Protestant Era (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 47.

intellectual honesty demands that either we remain in skeptical silence about God or lay aside theism in favor of a frank acceptance of natural processes as ultimate. The positions involve the notion that there is no real evidence for a transcendent being and energy beyond natural process.²¹

What is being said is that if we, as Christians, wish to talk with vast segments of the world's population about ethical norms, we cannot begin by talking about what God demands of man. It is the contention of this essay that the better place to begin discussion concerning ethical norms with our non-Christian contemporaries is with discussion about the nature of man. This does not mean that churchmen can expect a consensus to develop automatically as to the essential nature of man and the ethical norms complementary to this nature. Rather, what is being said is that talk about the nature of man offers us a point of departure for conversation about ethical norms with non-Christians more acceptable than discussion of what God requires of man.

Reinhold Niebuhr's understanding of the limitations of the traditional theories of natural law and of agape as

²¹Mack B. Stokes, "The Nontheistic Temper of the Modern Mind," Religion in Life, XXXIV (Spring, 1965), 245.

the only adequate final norm of human life allows some very real insight as to a possible way to involve non-Christians and Christians in discussion about the nature of man and ethical norms suitable to that nature.

It is well known that throughout Niebuhr's writings there are strictures against the theory of natural law in Roman Catholic moral theology and the forms it has sometimes taken in Protestant thought. Niebuhr sees man's nature as being best described in terms of certain polarities. First and foremost among these polarities is that of spirit/nature or spirit/body. Man is said to be a paradoxical creature who, on the one hand, transcends nature's necessities and limitations and, on the other hand, is subject to them. In Niebuhr's doctrine of man,

Man is a child of nature, subject to its impulses, and confined within the brevity of the years which nature permits its varied organic forms, allowing them some, but not too much latitude.²²

The other side of man's paradoxical nature is that he has a capacity for self-transcendence, the ability to make himself his own subject. ". . . Man is a spirit who stands outside nature, life, himself, his reason and the world."²³

Niebuhr is convinced that there is no explaining

²²Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), I:3.

²³Ibid.

things by reference to a fixed and given human nature. Man is in large measure what he becomes; he is not ready-made at the first. There are no fixed or set structures which man does not transcend by virtue of his spiritual freedom. Niebuhr's rejection of what he understands to be the traditional theories of natural law involves the denial of the idea that human nature conforms wholly to stable structures and nicely reposes within discoverable limits. The thread running through Niebuhr's repeated criticism of naturalism, rationalism, and romanticism is his contention that man's self-transcending freedom rises above the limits or even the vitalities of physical nature and above the patterns of reason or the uniquely individual organic structures discovered by romantic idealism.²⁴

Niebuhr is not denying that human personality does not have permanent structure. He acknowledges that there "is indeed a permanent structure of human personality," but that this is not nearly so fixed and immutable as many natural law theories suppose.²⁵ To put it more precisely, the immutable characteristics of man are the characteristics

²⁴Paul Ramsey, "Love and Law," Reinhold Niebuhr His Religious, Social and Political Thought, ed, Charles W. Keglegy and Robert W. Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 82-83.

²⁵Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, II:82.

of human nature rather than of nature, and this means that they are indefinitely qualified by the indeterminate freedom of man.²⁶ Man, according to Niebuhr, stands before possibilities for action which are not to be calculated in terms of the potentialities of a fixed essential nature of any sort.²⁷ Man's freedom affects and determines what he is or is to become; and he

grasps after possibilities envisaged only when, from the heights of self-transcending consciousness of himself and the present historical actuality, he seeks to reshape both himself and his social environment.²⁸

The indeterminate character of human freedom makes it more difficult indeed to be sure of what should be done and what should not be done than is supposed by laws based upon fixed structures of nature. Man's self-transcending powers combine with natural changes or circumstance to create new historical occasions and configurations with demands for new moral and ethical responses. Natural law theories fail because they are unable to do justice to the new and, in their rigidity, provide the basis for the absolutizing of relative historical judgments, responses, and

²⁶Ramsey, op. cit., p. 83.

²⁷Gordon Harland, The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 31.

²⁸Ramsey, loc. cit.

situations.

The question now arises as to whether or not there is an ethical norm adequate for man in his freedom. It is important to note that Niebuhr contends that for such a free spirit as man, love as agape is the final and ultimate law of life.

Despite his polemics against natural law theories, Niebuhr does propose a natural ethical law consistent with his interpretation of the nature of man. As has been seen, he views traditional natural law theories as failing to do justice to the special dimension of freedom in man's essential nature. There is in nature or reason, for Niebuhr, no form or structure to which the self ought to return from its freedom. Man's dimension of freedom points the self beyond the forms of nature, reason, and feeling toward a more ultimate harmony. A morality or ethics based mainly upon certain fixed structures of human nature is not natural in the sense that it does not conform to man's nature as indeterminate freedom.²⁹

Agape, or self-giving, sacrificial love, is for Niebuhr the natural and final norm for man in his condition of finiteness and freedom because man, guided and judged by this norm, is unable to make himself his own end. It

²⁹Ibid., p. 84.

is the only adequate final norm of human life, because no other does full justice to the dimension of depth in which the human spirit is set. Agape is relevant to man's nature precisely because it represents a degree of moral and ethical rigorism that surpasses any simple historical possibility. It does not deal with all the relativities of immediate moral and ethical problems and demands for decision. It does not dictate one or more sets of ethical decisions or socio-political forms as being automatically superior to all others. Man's nature is such that, through his radical freedom, he perpetually transcends all the ethical and moral criteria by which he judges the attitudes and actions of himself and his fellows. Likewise, he consistently transcends all the cohesions or forms of his communal life. The fact that, through reason, memory, and imagination, man can surmount himself and his world indeterminately means that his life cannot find its true ground in any of the ethical and moral norms short of agape. Man, then, is driven by the inner dynamism of his nature toward the transcendent norm of agape.³⁰ Agape, then is "the final law of human existence because every realization of the self which is motivated by concern for the self

³⁰Nathan A. Scott, Jr., Reinhold Niebuhr (Minneapolis: "Pamphlets on American Writers," No. 31: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), p. 7.

inevitably results in a narrower and more self-contained self than the freedom of the self requires."³¹

In the Niebuhrian context, agape is the chief part of the natural ethical law. Further, consonant with the dynamic nature of freedom, he outlines a dynamic conception of moral law. Love contains no code or fixed form to be imposed upon human freedom; nor is it the law for life only in some supernatural realm. Agape, then, is the solution of the problem of absolutism and relativism with which philosophers and ethicists wrestle in their systems of ethics and morals. Professor Tillich sums up this point in the following statement from his famous essay "Ethics in a Changing World":

Love, agape, offers a principle of ethics which maintains an eternal, unchangeable element but makes its realization dependent upon continuous acts of creative institution. Love is above law, also above the natural law in Stoicism and the supra-natural law in Catholicism. You can express it as a law, you can say as Jesus and the Apostles did: "Thou shalt love"; but in doing so you know that this is a paradoxical way of speaking, indicating that the ultimate principle of ethics, which, on the one hand, is an unconditional command, is, on the other hand, the power breaking through all commands. And just this ambiguous character of love enables it to be the solution of the question of ethics in a changing world . . . Love alone can transform itself according to the concrete demands of every individual and social situation without losing its eternity and dignity and

³¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, Faith and History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p. 175.

unconditional validity . . . Love, realizing itself from Kairos to Kairos, creates an ethic which is beyond the alternative of absolute and relative ethics.³²

It has been said that Christian ethics are distinguished from other forms of ethics by their orientation around the revelation given in Christ. Agape, as the supreme ethical norm, allows the Christian ethic to have its own grounding in the self-emptying love that is incarnate in the New Testament picture of Jesus as the Christ; its own unique motivation, refinement, and centeredness. Yet, at the same time, it allows for parallel contexts of faith which support the ethical awareness and convictions of non-Christians. As Christians, we cannot say that the cross creates the norm which is given with the very constitution of man's nature. In a word, the norm of agape revealed by Christ on the cross is far from being something alien and heteronomously imposed, but rather, is the clarification of the norm given in the nature of our own selfhood.³³ Niebuhr states this explicitly:

The fact is that the revelation of the Cross of Christ does not superimpose, but merely clarifies the truth about man's situation when ultimately considered. The situation which is clarified by the Christian faith can be validated by common experience.

³²Tillich, op. cit., pp. 154-55. cf. also the chapter entitled "Beyond Law and Relativity" in Reinhold Niebuhr, Faith and History.

³³Harland, op. cit., p. 14.

It is that the self is bound to destroy itself by seeking itself too narrowly, that it must forget itself to realize itself, but that this self-forgetfulness cannot be induced by the calculation that a more ultimate form of self-realization will flow from the forgetfulness. The ethic of the Cross therefore clarifies, but does not create, a norm which is given by the very constitution of selfhood.³⁴

All this is not to say that the elements of decision and faith discussed earlier are not being removed from the discussion of Christian ethical norms and values. What is being said is that while the Christian ethical norm requires decision, the revelation affirmed by the believer is not so unique as to be completely discontinuous with non-Christian ethical awareness. While Christian ethicists work from Christian revelation, it is possible for them to establish coherences and realms of meanings with at least some non-Christian ethicists and moralists.

It was earlier stated that ethical behavior refers to behavior according to reason, that is, according to the presuppositions and criteria of conduct ascertainable by reflective analysis. The refusal here to postulate a sharp division between the Christian revelation, witnessed to by Scripture, and non-Christian rational understandings, is a way of pointing to the possibility of some common agreement about ethical norms between Christians and non-Christians,

³⁴Reinhold Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), p. 232.

discoverable in part by an ordered reflection upon man's nature that is not necessarily informed by Christian pre-suppositions.

Hans J. Morgenthau, the distinguished political scientist and scholar, insists that the primary ethical problems of western man have centered around the conflict between the demands of a love-centered Christian ethic and the way man actually is and lives. He goes further by saying that the conflict between Christian ethics, defined by the norm of self-giving love, and the way man must live is the "overriding moral experience of western civilization."³⁵ If Morgenthau is correct, then discussion of ethics in terms of the norm of agape has the advantage in the west of a supportive ethos.

IV. A Movement, a Doctrine, and a Second Point of Departure

The combination of a movement and a traditional Protestant doctrine has made possible in our time a very real bridge between Christians and non-Christians co-existing in a single pluralistic political form. This combination provides the second theological point of departure from the Christian circle of ethical understanding

³⁵Hans J. Morgenthau, Politics in the Twentieth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), I:375.

to non-Christian moral and ethical sensitivity and, thereby, to discovery of areas of moral agreement.

The combination referred to here is that of modern Biblical criticism and the orthodox Protestant doctrine of the Fall. In brief, traditionally the Protestant understanding of the Fall meant that Adam was created in the image of God but that in his unhappy descendants the image of God was lost or almost lost or almost wholly perverted. The result of the combination of modern Biblical criticism and this traditional Protestant doctrine is the conviction that, while the idea of the Fall of man represents a universal truth about human nature, it can no longer be put in the context of temporal events. Adam and Eve are understood to be symbols of humanity and not as individuals with a temporal existence. This view of the doctrine allows a view of human nature which preserves the truth in the doctrine of the Fall but which avoids the idea that contemporary man is to be understood chiefly as the victim of a far-off event in the lives of Adam and Eve.

This interpretation provides a frame for anthropological thinking

which enables us to do greater justice to both the negative and positive aspects of human nature. Contemporary man does belong to corporate humanity and he inherits the effects of corporate sin, but when the Fall is associated with a temporal event

in the past, contemporary man is thought of as determined more completely by the burden of an evil inheritance than is actually the case.³⁶

Original perfection remains in fallen man in the sense that even a sick man has a vision of health:

The perfection before the Fall is always an ideal possibility before the act. It describes a dimension of human existence rather than a period of history. It is the vision of health which even a sick man has. It is the structure of the good without which there could be no evil.³⁷

Sinful man knows that his relations to God, the neighbor, and himself are obviously not an ideal state of health. This remnant of original health is best described in terms of the image of God.

It can be said, then, that according to this view, all men are made in the image of God and that the idea of the Fall symbolizes the continuous contradiction of that image in every man. "The great contrast is not between Adam before the Fall and all humanity since, but rather it is within every one of us."³⁸

The idea that in Christ the original image of God has been restored and that in some sense this restored image is effective in the life of man has provided the

³⁶Bennett, op. cit., p. 53.

³⁷Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christian Faith and Natural Law," Theology, XL (February, 1940), 89.

³⁸Bennett, op. cit.

basis for many protests to the implications drawn from this contemporary understanding of the traditional Protestant doctrine of the Fall by Reinhold Niebuhr, John Bennett, and other realist school thinkers. Certainly there is Biblical foundation for the idea that the restored image is effectual in the life of man. Nonetheless, whatever one may say about the residue of the divine image in man, as the positive side of human nature, or of the direct or indirect influence of God's grace through Christ upon contemporary humanity, he can say with certainty that separate or united they do not cancel the sinful pride, self-centeredness, and power-seeking of contemporary man, or of his inheritance of the consequences of past sins--either in the world of secular politics or in the life of the church.³⁹

It will be pointed out at a later point in the essay that the church's confession that man is a prideful, self-centered, and power-seeking creature offers a genuine insight into the nature and shape of politics. In our time, the insight provided by this confession has provided a bridge between Christian circles of understanding and secular social and political thought. The whole American realist school of political thought, fathered by Reinhold Niebuhr, is a tribute to the fact that at least a limited

³⁹Ibid., p. 54.

consensus can be developed over Christian and non-Christian lines with regard to ethical and moral possibilities and limitations.

Niebuhr, using Christian doctrine as a means by which to illumine the misery and grandeur of man, has exercised a deep influence upon the American school of politics associated with such thinkers as Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Thompson, C. B. Marshall, George Kennan, Dorothy Fosdick, Adlai Stevenson, and others. The indebtedness of such political thinkers to Niebuhr has been widely and gratefully acknowledged. For example, Kennan, discussing the realist school, identified Niebuhr as "the father of us all."⁴⁰ Certainly it would be hard to deny that some of the most profound insights into both international and domestic politics in our time have come from this school. It would be equally difficult to deny that much cross-conversation between secular and religious ethical and political thinkers has been made possible because the combination of modern Biblical criticism and the traditional Protestant doctrine of the Fall has allowed a point of common departure.

An outline has been given in this chapter of two points of departure from which churchmen can build bridges

⁴⁰Harland, op. cit., p. 192.

from the Christian circle of understanding to non-Christian moral and ethical sensitivity. These points will be elaborated and built upon in subsequent efforts to build a set of provisional propositions for Christians involved in a particular kind of urban political situation.

CHAPTER III

A SPECIFIC CONTEXT: AMERICAN URBAN POLITICAL SITUATIONS MARKED BY DECENTRALIZED LEGAL AUTHORITY AND POLITICAL POWER

I. Contextual Awareness, Urban Politics, and Power Structures

It will be remembered that it was stated earlier that this essay would work with a norm/context dialectic. Thus far, concern has been primarily with the norm pole of the dialectic. It is now possible to move to the consideration of the context side of the polarity which involves an acute awareness of what is actually going on in urban politics. The primary interest here is American political situations marked by decentralized or fragmented legal authority and political power.

For some time now there has been a growing interest in certain circles within the church in urban power structures. This interest has been directed toward the analysis and description of various urban power structures and the decision-making process within these structures. This analysis and description is usually followed by suggestions as to how the church might bring its resources and influence to bear on this decision-making.

The term power structure was made popular by a

sociologist, Floyd Hunter, in his study of "Regional City" (Atlanta, Georgia). Hunter's study concluded that about forty power leaders, most of them businessmen, "set the line on policy" in city affairs while an understructure of several hundred persons, including the major elective and appointive city officials, merely carried on the policies decided upon by the few at the top of the power pyramid. "The structure," Hunter states, "is that of a dominant policy-making group."¹

Those sociologists and political scientists for whom city governments constitute, as a general rule, an uncomprehended social order, see the major facts of the citizen's existence as being determined by powers and interests quite beyond and independent of his intentions and interests. Following Hunter, they see the top business and financial leaders in the community regulating and controlling urban life sometimes explicitly, but more often in a conspiratorial way.²

David Little points out two important characteristics implied in the power elite or stratification theory:

¹Floyd Hunter, Community Power Structure (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), p. 102.

²This point of view is developed on a wider national scale by C. Wright Mills in Power Elite. cf. Peter Drucker, "Employee Society," American Journal of Sociology, LVIII (January, 1953), 358-63.

- a. There is a denial of the possibility that individuals can make independent and significant political decisions, that is, that they can participate effectively in the political process.
- b. There is a denial that groups and associations representative of different community interests and purposes have any real access to the power elite; that they have a real chance of effecting community policy.³

Hunter's study had a positive effect on churchmen in that it prompted many of them to think seriously about the church's role in urban decision-making. The study pointed out the negligible nature of the influence of the churches upon civic affairs and decision-making. Ministers were generally seen as a good means by which to secure agreement of opinion in the community after policy had been determined by top leaders.⁴

Certain negative effects were also produced by wide reading of the Hunter study. Consideration of the study seems to have prompted the assumption that churchmen must work to discover the nature and shape of the power structure in a given urban situation. After this discovery has been made, it is assumed that the way will be clear to begin the task of outlining ways in which the church can

³David Little, "Social Theory, Christian Ethics, and Urban Politics." (paper read to the Annual Meeting of The American Society of Christian Ethics, 1965).

⁴Hunter, op. cit., p. 118.

influence the decision-making process in the city or metropolitan area under scrutiny. There has been much vague talk in church and civil rights circles about the power structure in a given urban situation. Much of this nebulous talk has been directly or indirectly influenced by knowledge of Hunter's study.⁵ While tightly centralized power structures do seem to exist in certain American cities, the more prominent characteristic of American urban situations is that of decentralized power and authority. That is to say, American cities in general are more characterized by a number of loosely connected and repeatedly

⁵Good examples of the confusing talk about urban power structures referred to here can be found in George D. Younger, The Church and Urban Power Structure (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 7-8. "When one gets inside the social structure of a city, he begins to understand that the basic policies and the most important decisions are made by a relatively small group of people. This observation is borne out by the results of study by trained social observers . . . The basic decisions at the policy-making level are made by a very few people . . . Call them power elite, top leadership, or what you will, these few people are not only the decision makers according to reputation. Study of the processes by which key decisions are made shows also that they set the basic framework within which all other decisions are made . . . Obviously, no one in this group possesses absolute power; yet power over basic decisions and arrangements is theirs. . . . One observer has made it plain that no city has a "Mr. Big," who calls the shots for every part of its life . . . Yet in every city there is a small group, concentrated in the fields of business and government, and shifting in membership as the generations come and go, that concerns itself with the city's welfare as seen from the broad perspective of its penthouse apartments or rooftop office suites or suburban estates."

shifting power structures rather than a tightly centralized single power structure.

The question to be asked of any social theory is: Does it accord with the facts it seeks to explain? Does it do justice to the actual empirical state of affairs? In the case of the stratification theory as applied to American cities by Hunter and others, there are a number of studies whose answer is persuasively in the negative. Other investigators, studying cities apparently quite different than Atlanta, found power structures, if they deserve to be called that at all, very unlike the one described in Hunter's study. Robert A. Dahl's study of New Haven, Connecticut, Who Governs?; Edward C. Banfield's study of Chicago, Political Influence; Wallace Sayre and Herbert Kaufman's, Governing New York City; and James Reichley's, The Art of Government, are good examples of what can be described as post-regional city studies. For example, Dahl's study

found a highly pluralistic system, characterized by stubborn and pervasive ambiguity, in which leaders drawn from many strata of the community and occupying diverse roles both lead and are led, and in which it was necessary to distinguish direct influence (possessed by relatively few) from indirect (possessed by a great many).⁶

⁶Edward C. Banfield and James Q. Wilson, City Politics (Cambridge: Harvard University Press and Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1963), p. 244.

These dissenting studies reveal important differences from city to city. Nevertheless, certain common findings mark these studies. For purposes of this essay, the most important of these is that legal authority and political power tend to be greatly decentralized in American cities rather than tightly centralized. Public affairs are not run by small, informal power elites.⁷ Nelson Polsby, in his recent study, Community Power and Political Theory, argues that neither Hunter nor any of the other proponents of the power elite theory have, in fact, demonstrated the validity of their hypothesis.⁸ He does not rule out the possibility that it might be proven to be true in certain situations; however, he claims that there is already enough available evidence to begin to establish a pluralist theory of community power which understands urban political decisions in a fragmented or open way. Accordingly, community power in a number of significant cases is not seen as a function of the commercial and financial notables; on the contrary, it is seen as fractured into categories of hundreds of small special interest groups, with incompletely overlapping memberships, widely differing power bases, and

⁷Ibid., p. 245.

⁸Nelson Polsby, Community Power and Political Theory (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), Chaps. 2, 3, and 5.

a multitude of techniques for exercising influence of decisions salient to them.⁹

The developing pluralist theory suggests certain important things about the urban processes of political decision-making. In the absence of a definite power structure, there are a number of available channels and modes through which individuals and groups may gain access to some of the decision centers, and, within limits, exert effective influence.¹⁰ Dahl points out, for example, that "in New Haven the political stratus is easily penetrated by anyone whose interests and concerns attract him to the distinctive political culture of the stratum."¹¹ Sayre and Kaufman assert that one of the qualities of New York's political system is "its openness."

No part of the city's large and varied population is alienated from participation in the system. The channels of access to the points of decision are numerous, and most of them are open to any group alert to the opportunities offered and persistent in pursuit of its objectives. All the diverse elements in the city, in competition with each other, can and do partake of the stakes of politics; if none gets all it wants, neither is any excluded.¹²

⁹Little, op. cit.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Robert A. Dahl, Who Governs? (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 91, (*italics added*).

¹²Wallace Sayre and Herbert Kaufman, Governing New York City (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1960), pp. 720-21.

It would seem that in a number of American cities, far from being harshly controlled or neatly pyramidal in nature, power and authority appear to be functionally highly specified, and at the same time very dependent upon broad community consensus on important issues.¹³

The pluralist theory, then, contradicts the two characteristics of urban political life common to power elite theories. On the pluralist interpretation:

- a. There is considerable elbow room for voluntary independent participation in groups which have a fighting chance to exert influence upon the government.
- b. There is a relative openness and equality of access accorded to a wide diversity of groups.
- c. Power and authority are decidedly specified and limited, and they are subject, finally, to a review of the electorate.¹⁴

II. Decentralized Legal Authority in American Cities

Much of the legal authority in American cities is decentralized right down to the voter. This occurs in three main ways:

A. Elections. The city voter has frequent opportunity--sometimes every year or two--to replace elected city officials.

The mayor (if there is no mayor, the council) is usually elected at large, thus the leading element

¹³Little, op. cit.

¹⁴Ibid.

of the city government is within the reach of the whole electorate. In many places, the council is elected on a ward basis. From a formal standpoint, this decentralizes authority even further, for there are several (in Chicago, 50) different electorates.¹⁵

B. In referenda on public expenditures, taxes, and other policy questions. State constitutions greatly contribute to decentralized authority with regard to public expenditures, taxes, and policy questions.

Over half the state constitutions prohibit cities from incurring debts or issuing bonds except with the approval of a majority of the voters. In some cases, the voters also pass on tax proposals, or on whether or not liquor shall be sold.¹⁶

In some situations, city officials may ask the voters for advisory opinions on certain questions.¹⁷

The use of the referendum is widespread; even in the largest cities, crucial matters--especially concerning capital expenditures--are put before the electorate, and in these cases the policy of the city officials necessarily hinges upon their expectations as to what the voters will do, or as to what they can be persuaded to do.¹⁸

C. In the possibility of taxpayers' suits. This means of decentralization of authority is radical in the sense that it reduces authority down to the individual citizen.

The courts have in many states made it possible to bring suits against local government in cases where one has no other standing than as a taxpayer.

¹⁵Banfield and Wilson, op. cit., p. 76.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

By initiating such a suit, a taxpayer may sometimes frustrate and may usually hamper and delay the actions of the local government.¹⁹

Taxpayers' suits can be brought for such things as challenges to the use of the eminent domain power in public construction of slum clearance, housing, highways, attacks on the constitutionality of various methods of municipal financing; cases questioning the granting of franchises or licenses; efforts to withhold salary payments to civil servants who hold office in violation of statutory standards, etcetera.²⁰

Every metropolitan area in the United States has many governments and much governmental activity. Many of the activities are federal, still more are state, and all operate through their several independent departments. In addition, there are the activities of the cities, authorities, villages, town, school, and other districts.²¹ Sprawling over municipal lines, township lines, school district lines, county lines, even state lines, our 212 metropolitan areas are a weird melange of over 16,200 separate units of government. The Chicago metropolitan area, one of the prize examples of fragmentation, has

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., p. 78.

²¹Luther Gulick, "Needed: A New Layer of Local Self-Government," Urban Government, ed, Edward C. Banfield (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), p. 90.

about 1,000 contiguous or overlapping local government units.²²

Most large American cities are not governed by a single hierarchy of legal authority in which all lines are gathered together at the top in one set of hands. On the contrary,

from a purely formal standpoint, one can hardly say that there is such a thing as a local government. There are a great many of them. Or, more aptly, bits and pieces of many governments are scattered around the local scene. To make any one of the governments work, it is necessary for some one to gather up the bits and bring them into working relation with each other.²³

When one speaks of the city government in most American cities, he is really speaking of "only the most conspicuous of several governments within the city."²⁴ This fact can be plainly seen in the case of Chicago. Legal authority in city and county matters (it will be remembered that important problems involve both the city and the county) is shared by the following 341 officials:

53 City Officials:	Mayor
	City Treasurer
	City Clerk
	50 Aldermen

²²Jane Jacobs, "Metropolitan Government," Democracy in Urban America, ed, Oliver P. Williams and Charles Press (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1961), p. 207.

²³Banfield and Wilson, op. cit., p. 76.

²⁴Ibid., p. 78.

- 21 County Officials: Assessor
 Treasurer
 Clerk
 Coroner
 State's Attorney
 Sheriff
 15 County Commissioners
- 12 Special Officials: 9 Trustees of the Metropolitan
 Sanitary District
 3 Members of the
 Zoning Board of Appeals
- 95 Judges: County Judge
 Probate Judge
 20 Circuit Court Judges
 36 Superior Court Judges
 37 Municipal Court Judges
- 160 Party Officials: 50 Ward and
 30 Township Committees for each
 of the two political parties.²⁵

Los Angeles represents extreme decentralization of legal authority. Several departments of the city government control their own funds and are, therefore, largely independent of the mayor and council. These include the departments administering airports, the city employees retirement system, the harbor, the library, recreation and park facilities, water and power, and the fire and police pension systems.²⁶

The mayor of Los Angeles is chief executive of the city in name only.

He can recommend legislation and veto (subject to council reversal), he must submit a yearly municipal budget to the council, and he has certain powers of

²⁵Ibid., p. 80.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 80-81.

appointment and removal which seem impressive at first glance but turn out to be mild or weak upon closer inspection.²⁷

The rhetoric of the city charter would at first glance seem to give the mayor's office much legal authority and practical power.

The (city) charter designates the mayor chief executive of the city and charges him to "exercise a careful supervision over all of its affairs" and to exercise a "constant supervision over all the acts and conduct of all officers and employees." But having assigned such administrative responsibility to the mayor, the charter does not grant him authority equal to the assignment. His administrative authority is highly restricted and very indirect. The real heads of most of the city departments are the boards and commissions. These, it is true, are appointed by the mayor and are removable by him. But both removal and appointment require council approval. If the mayor is at odds with the council over some other matter or if a majority of the council is sympathetic to an officer who has offended the mayor or with whom the mayor simply cannot work, the mayor is essentially powerless to do much about it. It is precisely this sort of restriction under which Mayor Yorty now chafes so publicly.²⁸

Legal authority is further diffused by the Los Angeles method of electing city councilmen. The district system is used to elect the fifteen city councilmen. This system is coupled with staggered terms for the members of the council. The combined effect of the district system and staggered terms is to further decentralize and

²⁷Francis M. Carney, "The Decentralized Politics of Los Angeles," The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, CCCLIII (May, 1964), 112.

²⁸Ibid.

distribute authority, power, and influence.²⁹

The members (of the city council) owe their elections mainly to forces or groups within their respective districts rather than to any city-wide or other single group or force. Until recently there have been no consistent voting blocs on the council, and winning majorities have had to put together anew with each issue. Since the accession of Mayor Yorty in 1961, there has emerged a stable and top-heavy "anti-Yorty" majority on the council, but one must say in all candor that the majority is apparently held together by its common antipathy to the aggressive mayor.³⁰

The end result of the district election system being coupled with staggered terms in that voters cast ballots for fifteen different men in staggered elections and elect "a council of fifteen sovereigns."³¹

The fact that Los Angeles is a nonpartisan city further frustrates the pinpointing of authority, power, and influence. Nonpartisan here means that party affiliations do not appear on the ballots cast in municipal elections and, theoretically, party-oriented partisan political considerations do not influence the voter's choice between candidates for city office. The original rationale of nonpartisanship was reform-oriented. Nonpartisanship appeared around the turn of the century as a part of reform efforts to curb the city political machines and to put city government on an honest and business-like basis.

²⁹Ibid., p. 111.

³⁰Ibid., p. 112.

³¹Ibid.

The only proper function of city government, many reformers believed was to provide certain necessary public services and facilities and to provide them as cheaply as possible. In this view, there was no need or justification for politics. The reformers believed that it was the introduction into local public affairs of considerations of party interest and party advantage that led to machines, bosses, corruption, and waste.³²

Whatever the original intention motivating the creation of nonpartisan city governments, the result of nonpartisanship is that it obscures the process by which candidates are selected and backed with campaign funds. At least regular political party organization offers some clue as to the channels through which men must go to become candidates with the necessary campaign war chests.

As has been stated, what is usually spoken of as the city government is in reality one of several governments within the city. In most sizable cities and in many very small ones, there are boards and commissions, councils, single officers, and special districts having little or no formal connection with the city government proper (that is, the mayor and the council).³³ Like nonpartisan elections, these autonomous or semi-autonomous bits and pieces of legal authority also developed out of reform endeavors.

During the nineteenth century, when reformers were anxious to keep certain city functions out of the hands of party machines, the practice was to create a large number of entirely independent boards and commissions--sometimes twenty or thirty. Most of

³² Banfield and Wilson, op. cit., p. 153.

³³ Ibid.

these eventually became city departments under the mayor and council, but today many are still loosely tied, or not tied at all, to the city government proper.³⁴

These pieces of legal authority include such entities as sanitary districts, school boards and administrations, park districts, public power districts, transit authorities, highway authorities, and so forth. Many of these independent boards and commissions have the legal authority to make ordinances (essentially laws of local application) and to raise revenue by levying taxes or issuing bonds. Some of these independent legal entities even have their own police forces. "Until recently the Chicago Park District patrolled some streets which the Chicago police could not enter."³⁵ The special district is created by the state legislature and is a quasi-corporation of the state. Usually a special district administers only one function of government, such as schools, airport, sewage disposal, rapid transit, or highway construction. The officers of special districts are usually appointed by officials or local governments or by local and state officials together. Some districts have officers entirely determined by state governments. In most cases there is no formal mechanism by which local governments can be brought together to coordinate their

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., p. 83.

activities with those of the autonomous or semi-autonomous special commissions, boards, and districts.³⁶

III. Possible Corrective Approaches to the Problems Resulting from Decentralization

At this point the reader may well be asking how anything of significance can be accomplished under public auspices in the American cities whose governmental situations are characterized by the elaborate decentralization and fragmentation of legal authority just described. The answer to this question is that for anything of major importance to be done decentralization must be overcome or set aside.

The widely diffused right-to-act must be replaced by a unified ability to act. The many legally independent bodies--governments or fragments of government--whose collaborations are necessary for the accomplishment of a task must work as one.³⁷

For some, the answer to the problems associated with the fragmentation of legal authority in urban areas is "the adjustment of management devices to the size which is forced upon us by events."³⁸ Luther Gulick, Adolf A. Berle, Jr., and others say that the way to solve problems resulting from decentralization is by the development of a comprehensive metropolitan government which would centralize

³⁶Ibid., p. 84.

³⁷Ibid., p. 101.

³⁸Gulick, op. cit., p. 89.

governmental administration and services. More adequate organization for effective planning and administration is, according to these experts, the primary solution for the problems of decentralization. Consolidation is seen as the key to the untangling of the urban governmental maze.

While in theory this approach seems sensible, it is in fact apt to remain a theoretical answer for many American urban areas for a long time to come. The larger the metropolis, as a rule, the more ardently its outlying communities will defend themselves against being swallowed.³⁹ While this fear may be selfish and shortsighted, it is a major stumbling block in the way of consolidation efforts.⁴⁰

Urban government involves more than efficient administration. It also involves creating or maintaining organization for the effective management of conflict, especially the management of the conflict arising from the growing cleavages of race and class. Edward Banfield and Morton Grodzins sum up this point as it relates to programs

³⁹Jacobs, op. cit., p. 209.

⁴⁰Davidson County, Tennessee and Dade County, Florida represent recent examples where the fears of certain kinds of consolidation were overcome to the apparent advantage of the citizenry. The following articles allow the reader a good introduction to these two experiments: Thomas J. Wood, "Dade County: Unbossed, Erratically Led," pp. 63-71; Daniel R. Grant, "Metropolitics and Professional Political Leadership: The Case of Nashville," pp. 72-86, Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, CCCLIII (May, 1964).

of urban governmental integration in the following paragraph:

Deep and persistent political conflicts divide the populations of most metropolitan areas. The conflict between the central city and the suburban ring--which also is a conflict between lower-classes and middle-classes and between Negroes and whites--in most places rules out any immediate possibility of one local government for one local area. The sharpness of these conflicts makes it doubtful in some places whether metropolitan-area government would be immediately desirable even if it were possible. Though the argument for larger areas in the long run is a persuasive one, it is hard to say whether short-run conflicts are better managed if the parties to them are members of the same or different political communities. But this question is not a practical one under present circumstances. The fact is that sweeping programs of governmental integration will be politically impossible in most metropolitan areas for a long time to come.⁴¹

Indeed, it may be that area-wide planning and administration would of necessity heighten conflicts by raising questions which can only be settled by bitter struggle. While not having the advantage of more effective organization in order to pursue important metropolitan undertakings, there may well be some very real advantage to having governmental forms which serve to insulate opposed interests and to protect them from each other.⁴²

Another possible corrective approach is that of

⁴¹ Edward C. Banfield and Morton Grodzins, "The Limitations of Metropolitan Reorganization," Democracy in Urban America, ed, Oliver P. Williams and Charles Press (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1961), p. 172.

⁴² Edward Banfield, as quoted by Jacobs, op. cit., p. 210.

federation. This approach involves some form of federation of governmental units within a metropolitan area, with the units surrendering some of their sovereignty to a metropolitan government.

The only metropolitan federation in operation thus far in North America--the federation of Toronto and 12 suburban satellites (all in one county, with some planning powers overlapping two other counties)--is a little too simple, in fact. So much power resides in the metropolitan council, and especially in its chairman, that, for U. S. consumption, it embodies many of the objections that apply to consolidation.⁴³

The nearest approach in the United States is the Miami, Florida plan (again involving one core city and its satellites in one county). The Miami scheme provides for unified powers over such matters as slum clearance, traffic, parking, and drainage--activities which in practice determine many great questions of land planning policy. Pragmatic adaptations of the federation approach may well offer us the best opportunity for achieving unified metropolitan government. They may be, as a number of experts believe, the handles by which we can best grasp hold of reasonably unified planning and administration.⁴⁴

Like it or not, sweeping programs of governmental integration would seem to be politically impossible in most American metropolitan areas for a long time to come. Those

⁴³Jacobs, op. cit., p. 215.

⁴⁴Ibid.

who unyieldingly push for perfectionist schemes can do the cause of reform more harm than good. Banfield and Grodzins sum up this point in the following statement:

The very energy poured into allegedly ideal solutions diverts attention from less symmetrical but no less desirable steps. And in exciting opposition to grandiose schemes of complete integration, proponents of such schemes also stimulate opposition to the lesser alternatives.⁴⁵

This essay is concerned with the practical problems of centralizing legal authority in the interim between the present, with all of its governmental confusion and frustrated attempts to act effectively and solve urban problems, and the future time when it will be possible to actualize more or less some of the more ideal solutions to the problems resulting from the metropolitan decentralization of legal authority and political power. That is to say, it is intended here to suggest provisional propositions for Christians seeking ethical guidance in this interim period.

IV. The Role of Politics in the Centralization of Legal Authority, Political Power, and Influence in American Cities

It has been said that for anything of significance to be accomplished under public auspices in the American

⁴⁵Edward C. Banfield and Morton Grodzins, "The Desirable and the Possible," Urban Government (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), p. 83.

cities and metropolitan areas characterized by the elaborate decentralization and fragmentation of legal authority described earlier in this chapter, the widely diffused right-to-act must be replaced by a unified ability-to-act. The many legally independent bodies (governments or fragments of government) whose collaborations are necessary for the accomplishment of a task, must work as one. The function and role of politics in most major American cities arises out of this need to have the various possessors of authority work in concerted fashion so that the right-to-act can be transformed into the ability-to-act. That is to say, someone must gather up the fragments of local governments and legal authority and bring them into working relation with each other.⁴⁶

For most important matters, the activity of several of the local governments is needed, and therefore governments, as well as bits of governments, must be brought into proper relation with each other. All of this gathering up and bringing together of authority requires the generation and use of political influence.⁴⁷

The politician in this situation is "a kind of broker who arranges the terms on which the possessors of bits and pieces of power will act in relation to one another."⁴⁸

As has been stated, there is very good evidence to

⁴⁶ Banfield and Wilson, op. cit., p. 76.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

believe that most of the larger American cities are not dominated by a single all-important power structure. There tends to be a number of loosely connected power structures in a given urban situation. The studies cited earlier as giving rise to and supporting the pluralist interpretation of American city political life indicate that, like legal governmental authority, non-governmental power and influence also tends to be decentralized. Non-governmental power structures represent to the politician such things as sources of campaign funds, influence at the statehouse or in Washington, possibilities of public support or opposition, votes, backing for specific programs, plans and projects, and, above all, special interests. Such power structures include organized labor, professional associations, civil rights and ethnic organizations, race-relations and inter-faith groups, welfare and social work agencies and organizations, the boards and trustees of educational and medical institutions, churches and other religious groups, and other such organized entities. Each power structure has its own set of special interests and aims.⁴⁹

A vital part of the work of the politician is to bring these power structures into a working relationship with each other. He must centralize unofficial and

⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 242-260.

extra-legal power in order to provide himself with the means by which to be elected and the power with which to be able to carry out his programs and plans once he is elected. The politician is a broker or matcher of interests. If he is able to bring together enough interests, he will have a base of power and operation.

The politician usually gains the support of a particular power structure by offering special inducements which only local governments can offer. For example, the good-government association may be offered a certain kind of reform in a particular branch of local government. Downtown merchants may be offered the inducement of support for a new expressway designed to bring suburban shoppers back to the central city shopping areas. The civil rights organization may be offered more consideration for minority group job applicants in city hiring practices. In return for these and other such special inducements, the politician receives campaign funds, votes, public endorsements, and support for his programs and plans for the city. He trades special inducements for the support and power which allows him the power to act.⁵⁰

Chicago represents extreme success with regard to centralizing and coordinating the bits and pieces of both

⁵⁰Ibid.

official and unofficial power, authority, and influence. In addition to the fact that legal authority is shared by some 341 officials in the Chicago governmental situation, Chicago is officially a nonpartisan city in that party affiliations are not printed on the ballot.⁵¹ Chicago has overcome decentralization of authority and power by an extreme centralization of power. This power is gathered mainly by the offering of special inducements.⁵²

The office of mayor is the center around which power and authority are centralized.

The mayor of Chicago is a boss. That is to say, he is a broker in the business (so to speak) of buying and selling political power. He performs an entrepreneurial function by overcoming the decentralization of authority that prevents anything from being done, and in his role is very like that of the real estate broker who assembles land for a large development by buying up parcels here and there.⁵³

The mayor of Chicago has used the authority of his office to acquire power, and has used power to acquire more power and ultimately more authority. Bits of legal authority have been bought from the many small owners (voters, for example) who received it from the constitution-makers or got it by being elected or appointed to office. Strictly speaking, the mayor has acquired control over the use of authority, not authority itself. Those who sell

⁵¹Ibid., p. 151.

⁵²Ibid., p. 104.

⁵³Ibid.

their authority to the mayor receive jobs, party preferment, police protection, other bits of influence, and other considerations of value in return.⁵⁴ To control the city council, the mayor uses specific inducements, especially patronage and party preferment and the threat of dumping a rebel to maintain strict discipline.

In addition to controlling the city council, the mayor has a big block of votes in the legislature. Few Cook County Democrats would dare to go against him and many Cook County Republicans get patronage or other favors from him. He controls indirectly the votes of many downstate Democratic legislators who are beholden to downstate bosses who must bargain with him. So strong is the mayor in the legislature that even when both houses are Republican, a Republican governor must bargain with him.⁵⁵

Even the decentralization of authority to the voters has in large measure been overcome by incumbent Mayor Richard J. Daley.

Through his control of the party machinery, the mayor can usually get his proposals approved by the electorate. If an unpopular public expenditure is to be voted upon, he can have it put on the ballot at an election for minor offices when the vote is light and only the party regulars come out.⁵⁶

Does this extreme centralization of power set up an arbitrary and paternalistic power structure? The answer seems to be negative.

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 104-105.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 105.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 106.

The heads of the Democratic party have ample power to decide almost any matter. For various reasons they prefer to ratify proposals themselves. The elected officials follow the strategy of delaying a decision as long as possible while at the same time encouraging those concerned to put pressure upon them. From the amount and nature--especially from the representatives--of this pressure they found clues by which to form an estimate of how the matter was viewed by the public at large. . . . Here the Mayor feels that it is his duty to do what the community wants.⁵⁷

Los Angeles represents a situation in which neither the mayor nor any other elected official has the base from which to centralize official and unofficial power, influence, and legal authority. In Chicago the mayor's office provides an initial base for the gathering up and piecing together of legal authority. With the sort of decentralized city government provided by the Los Angeles city charter, there seems to be no official base from which to centralize power and authority. This does not mean that unofficial efforts to centralize power do not take place in Los Angeles. The selection of a candidate for mayor to represent the important downtown business and commercial interests has in the past been made after a series of meetings in which are brought together "the spokesmen of the metropolitan press, the larger manufacturing and utility companies, and the banks, department stores, and other leading interests."⁵⁸ The Los Angeles Times has

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 244.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 162.

often taken the lead in arranging such meetings. These meetings have produced candidates, campaign funds, and a public relations firm to conduct the campaign.⁵⁹ These meetings have not always provided winning candidates, however. For example, in 1961 the Times strenuously opposed Samuel Yorty but could not prevent his election.⁶⁰

City government is often treated in both academic and nonacademic circles as primarily a matter of administration rather than politics.⁶¹ The administration approach to urban government is concerned more

with legal arrangements than with the informal devices by which things are actually done, more with the activities of appointed officials (bureaucrats) than with those elected ones (politicians), and more with the procedures by which routines are carried on than with the large forces that determine the content of policy.⁶²

City government, according to this view, is to be likened to a corporation whose duty is to provide efficient services to the taxpayer--corporation member. The issues in a given election are said by this view to be properly understood as being centered around the matters of administrative policy and efficiency. As much as possible, city government is

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 160.

⁶⁰Carney, op. cit., p. 111.

⁶¹Lawrence J. R. Herson, "The Lost World of Municipal Government," Urban Government, ed, Edward C. Banfield (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), p. 5.

⁶²Banfield and Wilson, op. cit., p. 2.

to be run by trained experts who pursue their tasks without interference from politicians. This approach to city government has historically been advocated in America by the municipal good-government movement. The reform ideas advocated over a long period of time by the National Municipal League are good examples of this sort of understanding of the proper approach to the problems of municipal governments. A number of studies indicate that the assumption that city government primarily concerns the businesslike management of essential public services is the dominant assumption in upper and upper-middle class American circles.⁶³

Practical reasons have been described as to why this approach is much too simple. Reasons have been given which indicate that any understanding of city government which does not acknowledge the important and positive role played by politics in urban governmental affairs is an inadequate understanding.⁶⁴ In addition to the pragmatic

⁶³Ibid., pp. 138-150.

⁶⁴Grant, op. cit. It is important here to point out that the Davidson County (Nashville), Tennessee centralization of governmental administration and services was made possible primarily by the politicians and not by the usual good-government forces. This fact is especially important in view of the fact that it disrupted the political bailiwicks of a number of the politicians who made the centralization possible. It is hoped that this new form of county government, which went into operation in April 1963 and

reasons already presented, it can also be said that the efficient corporation approach fails to recognize that pluralistic American notions of government are marked by positive attitudes toward politics.

Our constitutional structure and our traditions afford individuals manifold opportunities not only to bring their special interests to the attention of public officials but also--and this is the important thing--to compel officials to bargain and make compromises.⁶⁵

The nature of our governmental system "gives private interests such good opportunities to participate in the making of public decisions that there is virtually no sphere of administration apart from politics."⁶⁶

Our conclusions to this point are as follows:

which will eventually carry on most local government functions, can remedy the problems of thirty years of Nashville suburban spill-over without annexation. This spill-over led to the familiar pattern of a service vacuum, inequalities, rivalries, and confused responsibility. An example of the sort of problems caused by the lack of coordination between and definition of responsibility by the various local governments in Davidson County is the fact that thousands of acres of beautiful open spaces and woodland were cut up for residential subdivisions without reserving a single acre for public parks and playgrounds. County leaders declared they had no authority to operate suburban parks, and city leaders declared they had no responsibility for such.

It is of course much too early to see whether or not the new Davidson County governmental form will create centralized political power to match the centralization of governmental authority.

⁶⁵ Banfield and Wilson, op. cit., p. 2.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

- a. It is impossible to understand the governmental affairs of the major American cities unless we recognize that these affairs are largely determined by political bargaining and matching of special interests.
- b. That this sort of political process allows a city the ability to embark on and carry through specific plans and programs.
- c. That this process of bargaining and matching is quite proper in terms of American constitutional and political traditions.

V. Dallas: A Harsh but Helpful Contrast

Dallas is apparently the ideal American city for those persons to study who are intent on discovering and identifying a single and all determining power structure and decision-making process. Dallas is governed (ruled might be the more accurate word) by an extremely well organized, paternalistic, and effective power elite. The civic and political affairs of Dallas are marked by extremely centralized power and authority. Because this is the case, it will be helpful to our study of decentralized power and authority to outline briefly the centralized Dallas situation. This outline will present a harsh contrast to the civic and political affairs of Chicago and Los Angeles and will assist the reader to understand better what is meant by decentralized power and authority.

Dr. Douglas Jackson, a sociologist on the faculty of Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology,

has described the Dallas situation this way:

Under the present business leadership, smaller groups concerned with a variety of Dallas community interests are deprived of the feeling of representation or participation in the decision-making process. They are deprived of means to make their problems known and make them count. The leadership is a paternalistic structure which makes it difficult if not impossible for the individual to be represented and take part in decisions that concern him. Small groups cannot bring their problems to the attention of the decision-makers with any force or support and they cannot take any part in the decisions because the leadership is an informal and unofficial body.⁶⁷

Three distinct but interlocking organizations provide the mechanism of power in Dallas. Chief among these three organizations is the Dallas Citizen's Council. This organization is twenty-seven years old and its membership of 250 maximum is by invitation only. The group perpetuates the original conception to invite none but the chief executive officers of the city's biggest corporations. These are men with the power to say "yes" or "no" to a project and have it binding on the enterprises they head. Meetings are held twice a year for the general membership, once a month for the twenty-eight man board of directors. The exact membership is kept a mystery and the organization's object is not to do things as a council, but to decide what needs doing and then have its members accomplish the objectives on an individual or committee basis. The council brings together

⁶⁷Richard Austin Smith, "How Business Failed in Dallas," Fortune, XLII (July, 1964), 158.

the economic strength of the entire community, the biggest banks and insurance companies, real estate and retailing, manufacturing and oil operations, communications, transportation, and public utilities, etcetera. With the backing of the Citizens' Council, almost anything can be done; in the face of its opposition, or indifference, little or nothing.⁶⁸

Fortunately, the size and nature of the Citizens' Council membership is no longer the mystery it was as recently as four years ago. Two events mark the removal of much of the mystery associated with Citizens' Council membership. The first mystery removing event was the publication of The Decision Makers, a study of the Citizens' Council by sociologist Carol Estes Thometz. This important study numbers at about 200 the effective leadership of Dallas. Yet, within this power structure, a small top-influence group of five to twenty-five are the prime movers and hold the bulk of real power and influence.⁶⁹ The second event was Fortune magazine's publication of a list of the names and occupations of the membership of the Citizens' Council. Council membership falls into the

⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 211-212.

⁶⁹Carol Estes Thometz, The Decision Makers (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963), pp. 70-76.

categories of original charter member, advisory member, and associate member. The occupations of the membership and the number of members are as follows:⁷⁰

4 Brokerage	3 Personal Service
4 Business Service	1 Professional Service
12 Construction	7 Public Utility
5 Distribution	4 Real Estate
1 Education	27 Retail Trade
29 Finance	8 Sales Officers
3 Hotels	1 Theatre
20 Insurance	7 Transportation
42 Manufacturing	2 Warehousing
3 Newspapers	8 Wholesale Trade
25 Oil and Gas	6 Individuals

Intimately associated with the council is a sort of training organization for future civic leaders, the Dallas Assembly. The Assembly is comprised of 100 men between the ages of twenty-five and fifty. It is concerned with the city's problems and their resolution, though to a much more limited extent than the Citizens' Council. Assembly members regularly graduate to the Council as men in the senior organization retire or are displaced as chief executives.⁷¹

The third entity is a money machine, the Dallas County Screening Committee. This group decides what civic agencies and drives should or should not be supported and for how much. An agency or cause rejected by this organization can go it alone; but, since this screening

⁷⁰Smith, op. cit., p. 214.

⁷¹Ibid.

represents the business interests, the chances of getting substantial contributions are slight.⁷²

The Charter Association is the political arm of the Citizens' Council. It selects candidates for city and school administration posts and backs them with money. This association functions to keep the city clear of partisan politics, whose disruption and uncertainties might seriously challenge the power of the business leadership. A city manager form of government (Dallas is the only city of its size still so run) allows for ease of manipulation. The mayor and the policy-making City Council are elected on a city-wide basis. This does not forestall election of a non-influential independent council member or two, but it effectively forestalls representation of a particular area or district such as that occupied by Negroes or Latin Americans which now make up close to 20 percent of the Dallas population.⁷³

No important aspect of community life is left unaffected by interlocking directorates or trusteeships staffed by Citizens' Council members. A member of the Council sits on the board of every major hospital, every major church, Southern Methodist University, the two newspapers, the Industrial Council, and the Chamber Council.⁷⁴

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid., p. 213.

⁷⁴Ibid., pp. 212-13.

The church follows rather than leads in the Dallas situation. Frederick S. Carney, professor of Christian social ethics at the Perkins School of Theology, sums it up in the following fashion:

The church here more characteristically reflects the culture than speaks to it. And its clergymen are in constant danger of becoming spiritual errand boys for the oligarchy.⁷⁵

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 162.

CHAPTER IV

ANTHROPOLOGY AND POLITICS

I. Ambiguity, Individualism, and the Political Process

The political process of matching interests and developing alliances of interests creates complex and highly ambiguous associations and relationships. It is conceivable, for example, that a candidate for the office of mayor in a large American city could, in return for support, or at least the absence of public censure, promise civil rights, race relations, and church organizations more consideration for minority group job applicants in city hiring practices. The same candidate could also receive unofficial support from a number of central city commercial interests (hotels, restaurants, department stores, night clubs, etcetera) for assurances that certain anti-vice ordinances will not be rigorously enforced in specific downtown entertainment areas. The supporting assumption would be that strict enforcement of these ordinances in given downtown areas would curtail the entertainment of visiting conventioners who stay in hotels, buy gifts in central city department stores and shops for the folks back home, spend money in night clubs and restaurants, and other entertainment spots. The fear motivating the offer of support might be that more wide-open cities might

lure conventions and conventioners away from their city. In the course of the campaign, the same candidate could promise certain residential neighborhood organizations more rigorous enforcement of the same anti-vice ordinances in their local neighborhoods. In such a possible situation the candidate would have satisfied the special interests of the downtown businessman, the B girl, the bishop, and the housewife.

It may well be that the ambiguous and complex nature of political maneuvering in the urban situation is all but incomprehensible to many Americans. Many Americans are so steeped in the psychology and mythology of rugged individualism that they rarely develop any mature appreciation of their involvement in the myriad of social relationships which characterize contemporary American life. A few evenings taken up with television viewing will allow the reader to understand why this is the case. If he so desires, the American television viewer can nightly watch T.V. cowboy, the omnipotent individual, head off villains at Eagle Pass and save the day for virtue. He can see the private eye, the knight-in-trench coat, protect everything from female honor to atomic secrets with nothing more helpful than the jagged top of a broken bottle. In such vehicles of the mythology of rugged individualism, the heroic individual manages to win through despite the

fumbling interference of social forces.¹ A few evenings of critical television viewing will allow the reader to understand why it may be that "the average American doesn't believe in society. He knows that it is just a figment of the socialist imagination."²

Just as the complexity of urban political maneuvering may be all but incomprehensible to many Americans, the extreme ambiguity involved in the metropolitan political process may be very distasteful to many Christians. Certainly the urban political process involves all sorts of ethically and morally questionable activity and behavior. It will be expected that churchmen will be perplexed by the shades of grey and black which characterize political activity in a pluralistic society, for the Christian is formally taught absolute and demanding moral and ethical ideals in the church.

II. The Limitations of Man in His Socio-Political Involvement

The work of Reinhold Niebuhr offers valuable theological resources to the Christian who is perplexed by the complexities of participation in city politics. The

¹William Muehl, Politics for Christians (New York: Association Press, 1956), pp. 12-18.

²Ibid., p. 13.

problem of relating the Christian faith to the world of political, economic, and social life is for Niebuhr the problem of discovering the relationship between the absolute demands of the Christian ethic and the necessary relative morality of effective social and political involvement. It is precisely the discovery of the relationship between the absolute ethical and moral demands of the Christian faith and the ambiguous and relative ethics and morality of the political process which the churchman must make if he is to be both a Christian and a knowledgeable participant in city politics.

Niebuhr judges political methods by a twofold criteria:

- a. Do they do justice to the moral resources and possibilities in human nature and provide for the exploitation of every latent moral capacity in man?
- b. Do they take account of the limitations of human nature, particularly those which manifest themselves in man's collective behavior?³

It is best to begin the effort to understand this twofold criteria by outlining what Niebuhr understands to be the limitations of man in his social and political involvement. An unprejudiced analysis of man's socio-political life, Niebuhr has discovered, must come to the

³Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), p. xxiv.

conclusion that no matter how moral individuals may be, society itself is intrinsically immoral. It is part of the tragic character of human nature that man is unable to conform his collective life to his individual ideals:

As individuals, men believe that they ought to love and serve each other and establish justice between each other. As racial, economic, and national groups they take for themselves whatever their power can command.⁴

This observation led Niebuhr to the following conclusion:

A sharp distinction must be drawn between the moral individual and social groups; and this justifies and necessitates political policies which a purely individualistic ethic must always find embarrassing.⁵

After observing the nature of the interaction between corporate groups, Niebuhr came to the conclusion that any realistic insight into man's socio-political situation must be founded upon an understanding of "the brutal character of all human collectives." Power is the stuff which holds society together. Societies differ to be sure in the measure of justice which characterizes them, but whether they are just or unjust, they are and will remain so or change for better or for worse by the application of power, naked or disguised. Effective social and political action will be determined by the proportion of power which each group possesses at least as much as by any rational and

⁴Ibid., p. 21.

⁵Ibid., p. 18.

moral appraisal of the comparative needs and claims of each group.⁶

By viewing what Niebuhr assumes to be the limitations of human reason, one can better understand his conclusions about the role played by power in the interaction between collectives. Reason can work toward the improvement of the social and political situation, but its limitations must be kept clearly in mind. "No individual member of a group," says Niebuhr, "much less a group, will ever be able to see the needs of others as vividly as he recognizes his own, or be as quick in his aid to remote as to immediately revealed necessities."⁷ He insists that man's individual desire to do the good is inevitably compromised by his corporate involvement. The first compromise comes when the individual enters social groups. At this point his good intentions come into conflict with other group members' notions of the objective good; the result is that the parties which are in conflict all compromise their notions of the objective good. The consensus that is the resolution of the group's internal conflict does not do justice to any individual member's notions of the objective good. The good the individual would do in a corporate situation is less apt to be influential in determining the collective action of

⁶Ibid., p. xiii.

⁷Ibid., p. 18.

the group. The result is a blunting of and restriction upon the individual's good intentions. Man's reason and capacity for empathy are limited to such a degree that he cannot trust them to understand fully his fellow's need and problems to any degree of completeness. The possibility of extending reason and empathy does not guarantee that they can be extended far enough to give a majority of the individuals in our group a comprehension of the total situation, needs, and interests of the members of groups other than our own.

The thing men can understand is power. Power may take many forms. It may take such forms as pure physical force, economic pressure, social and political exclusion, or the threat of violence. The ability of a group to gain serious consideration of its interests and concerns is in large measure dependent upon its power to force recognition of its concerns and interests. Groups interact with one another largely in terms of considerations based on the ability to force recognition of their concerns and interests. Power is the means by which a group asserts its self-interest. The matching of self-interests by different groups takes place in order to form alliances which allow the allied groups more power to prompt greater consideration of their individual self-interests.

The significance of this distinction between

individual and collective morality for political theory is plain. For if the morality of groups is inferior to that of individuals, then the struggle for justice will involve political necessities unrecognized by moralists and ethicists who imagine social harmony to be the inevitable consequence of the stretching of man's capacity for empathy and sympathy, and the exercising of his rational capacities. Because it is practically impossible in inter-group relations to establish anything comparable to intra-group relations purely by the moral and rational suasion which has some effectiveness within the group, relations between groups

must therefore always be predominantly political rather than ethical, that is, they will be determined by the proportion of power which groups possess at least as much as by any rational and moral appraisal of the comparative needs and claims of each group.⁸

Politics is that activity by which human collectives attempt to influence and affect one another short of physical violence and the use of armed force. Influence, in the context of political activity, is the ability to cause others to act in accordance with one's intention. Power is that influence which more or less forces others to act in accord with one's demands. The use of power and the possible use of force are inseparable from the bene esse of politics. It is not possible to have good

⁸Ibid., p. xxiii.

politics without the use of influence and power.⁹

Man's aspiration for power over other men is the very essence of politics. While he seeks power over others, others seek power over him. The political act centers around the seeking of power over another individual, group, or nation, and involves in one way or another the denial of that individual's, group's, or nation's freedom.¹⁰

Morgenthau understands political power (that power short of violence arising from the actual use of force) to involve a psychological relationship in which an individual, group, institution, or nation controls certain actions of other individuals, groups, institutions, or nations. This influence or control is derived from three primary sources: the expectation of benefits, the fear of disadvantages, the respect or love of men or institutions. It is exerted through orders, threats, promises, persuasion, the authority or charisma of a man or of an office, or a combination of any of these.¹¹

A more fundamental limitation upon reason is the

⁹Paul Ramsey, "The Uses of Power," The Perkins School of Theology Journal, XVIII (Fall, 1964), p. 14.

¹⁰Hans J. Morgenthau, Dilemmas of Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 47.

¹¹Hans J. Morgenthau, Politics in the Twentieth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), III: 11.

fact that reason does not determine man's actions so much as does his will. The essential man is not so much the thinking man as the willing man. When the will is given to lust for power, as it almost always is, reason can do very little to control it. In fact, not only is reason unable to control the egotistical will of man; it actually becomes the instrument of man's egotism. Reason does not control the selfishness which makes force necessary; selfishness controls reason.¹²

The will-to-power uses reason as kings use courage and chaplains, to add grace to their enterprises. Even the most rational men are never quite rational when their own interests are at stake.¹³

We can understand what Niebuhr means by will-to-power only if we understand the essentials of his doctrine of sin. As formerly stated, Niebuhr sees man's nature as being best described in terms of certain polarities. First and foremost among these polarities is that of spirit/nature or spirit/body. Man is a paradoxical creature who, on the one hand, transcends nature's necessities and limitations and, on the other hand, is subject to them. In Niebuhr's doctrine of man,

¹² Shirley Caperton Guthrie, The Theological Character of Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethic (Winterhur: Keller, 1959), p. 25.

¹³ Niebuhr, loc. cit.

Man is a child of nature, subject to its impulses, and confined within the brevity of the years which nature permits its varied organic forms, allowing them some, but not too much latitude.¹⁴

The other side of man's paradoxical nature is that he has a capacity for self-transcendence, the ability to make himself his own subject. ". . . man is a spirit who stands outside nature, life, himself, his reason and the world."¹⁵

The human spirit is set in a dimension of depth in such a way that it is able to apprehend, but not to comprehend, the total dimension . . . human reason is itself imbedded in the passing flux, a tool of a finite organism, the instrument of its physical necessities and prisoner of the partial perspectives of a limited time and place . . . This paradoxical relation of finitude and infinity, and consequently of freedom and necessity, is the mark of the uniqueness of the human spirit in this creaturely world. Man is the only creature imbedded in the flux of finitude who knows that this is in his fate; which proves that in some sense this is not his fate.¹⁶

Man's awareness of his partial and limited nature causes him to become anxious about his physical insecurity. Further, it causes man to be anxious about the relative questionable nature of his rational and intellectual constructions and perspectives. This relativity, he fears, points to the meaninglessness of all his spiritual endeavors. It is from this anxious state that sin and

¹⁴Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), I:3.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Reinhold Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935), p. 66.

will-to-power spring:

Anxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved. Anxiety is the internal precondition of sin. It is the inevitable spiritual state of man standing in the paradoxical situation of freedom and finiteness.¹⁷

The anxiety which results from man's self-transcendence tempts him to try to escape the tension caused by awareness of his limitations. This is to say, man seeks to escape the sort of tension which results from twofold nature, or at least from the recognition of his nature. If he yields to that temptation, if he seeks to escape the dialectic, to be that which he is not, he sins. As a result of the recognition of his twofold nature, there are two primary ways in which man sins. The first of these is pride. Man may absolutize the side of his nature which is his spiritual freedom and deny the side which is finiteness. In this case, he becomes guilty of the sin of pride. The second basic way of sinning is by losing oneself in sensuality. Here man seeks to escape from the responsibility of his spiritual side, and tries to lose himself in his finiteness. Whereas pride absolutizes man's spiritual freedom, sensuality absolutizes his physical needs and desires. Both kinds of sin are one in their claim to finality.

It is within the scope of this essay to consider

¹⁷R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, I:182.

only the sin of pride. The chief forms of pride are pride of power, pride of knowledge, pride of virtue, and pride of spirit. Our concern is with two facets of the sin of pride: the pride of knowledge and the pride of power. Man seeks to deny his finiteness and negates his feelings of anxiety by attempting to control or destroy all the threats to his existence. These threats may include physical, economic, political, sociological, ideological, and intellectual threats. He attempts to deny his limitations by destroying all threats which remind him of his limited and finite nature. He seeks to

obscure the human predicament by various forms of self-worship, grasping after security, power and wealth, and claiming to have a greater degree of wisdom and virtue than moral creatures can have.¹⁸

He may attempt to deny threats to his assumed self-sufficiency by a will-to-power which seeks to deny his fellows the right of counter-thought and activity. Through pride of knowledge, man seeks to deny his ignorance by assuming that he can gradually transcend finite limitations.¹⁹ Man, in his anxiety and insecurity, makes absolute claims for himself, his social and political

¹⁸Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Christian Moral Witness and Some Disciplines of Modern Culture," Making the Ministry Relevant, ed, Hans Hofman (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), p. 39.

¹⁹R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, I:179.

groupings, and his partial and finite values and perspectives. In short, man attempts to be God.²⁰

Strictly speaking, individuals are the only moral agents, so group pride cannot be more than an aspect of the arrogance of individuals. Nevertheless, group pride does achieve a kind of authority over the individual, and, developing organs of will (as in state apparatus), takes on the character of an independent centre of moral life. Now because these collective entities are "held together much more by force and emotion than by mind," the pretensions and claims of the social unit exceed those of the sinful individual. The group is more arrogant, hypocritical, self-centered, and more ruthless in the pursuit of its ends than the individual, which creates the moral tension between group and individual morality.²¹ Collective pride is "man's last, and in some respects most pathetic, effort to deny the determinate and contingent character of his existence."²² Collective egotism, being the very essence of human sin, is then a more fertile source of injustice than purely individual egotism. The religious dimension

²⁰R. Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p. 84.

²¹Theodore Alexander Gill, Recent Protestant Political Theory (London: Hunt, Barnard, 1953), p. 154.

²²R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, I:213.

of sin is rebellion from God. The ethical and socio-political dimension of sin is aggression and injustice. Individually and collectively: "The ego which falsely makes itself the centre of existence in its pride and will-to-power inevitably subordinates other power to its will and thus does injustice to other life."²³

Sinful man, as has been said, is unwilling to accept his finiteness. Sin occurs precisely because man unavoidably, but not of necessity, denies his dependence on God and chooses the pretension of independence. Niebuhr's understanding of the function played by man's will in the choice for sinful pretension is illuminating. The will is the product of that determining aspect of man lying at the juncture of spirit/nature. Sin is original at the point where spirit/nature and reason/impulse unite in an act of will. But, human sinfulness is never simply an act of sheer defiance of God. The Devil symbol in Christianity gives dramatic expression to the insight that man has been tempted.

There is an element of inevitability about man's precarious situation on the boundary between spirit and nature that tempts him to grasp at partial securities and to absolutize them.²⁴

²³Ibid., p. 179.

²⁴William John Wolf, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man," Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought, ed, Charles W. Keglegy and Robert W. Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 239.

The occasion of this temptation is discussed in concise form in the following statements from Niebuhr's The Nature and Destiny of Man.

What is the situation which is the occasion of temptation? It is not the fact that man is a finite spirit, lacking identity with the whole, but yet a spirit capable in some sense of envisaging the whole so that he easily commits the error of imagining himself the whole he envisages. . . . The fact is that man is never unconscious of his weakness, of the limited and dependent character of his existence and knowledge. . . . The occasion of his temptation lies in the two facts, his greatness and weakness, his unlimited and his limited knowledge, taken together. Man is both strong and weak, both free and bound, both blind and far-seeing. He stands at the juncture of nature and spirit; and is involved in both freedom and necessity. His sin is never mere ignorance. It is always partly an effort to obscure his blindness by overestimating the degree of his sight and to obscure his insecurity by stretching his power beyond its limits.²⁵

Niebuhr discusses what appears to be man's bias toward evil in terms of the doctrine of Original Sin. This doctrine alone seems adequate to Niebuhr for the task of describing man's continual attempt to escape his dialectical nature and be what he is not. He seeks to show that all men are sinful (sin is inevitable) and yet that sin does not belong to man's essential nature (sin is not necessary; man is responsible for it). "Sin is natural for man in the sense that it is universal but not in the sense that it is necessary."²⁶ In regard to Original Sin,

²⁵R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, I:181.

²⁶Ibid., p. 242.

Niebuhr's rationale is as follows:

Man is anxious because his self-transcendence reveals his insecurity and finiteness. This anxiety could lead to faith which enables him to accept the paradox of his dialectical nature: sin is not necessary. But as a matter of fact, anxiety always does result in the sin of trying to escape the dialectic by absolutizing one side or the other of it: sin is inevitable. That anxiety inevitably leads to sin when it could lead to faith can be explained only by assuming that it is already accompanied by sin--an original sin or bias toward evil.²⁷

Sin, or rebellion and unnecessarily aggressive behavior toward one's fellows, cannot be relegated to one part of man only. It inheres in all decision and action where the whole personality is bound together in spirit. But the root of sin is in the capacity of man for transcendence and not in nature:

The self in the moment of transcending itself exercises the self's capacity for infinite regression and makes the previous concretion of will its object.²⁸

It is quite possible, at this point, that the reader's impatience is about to burst into all this theologizing with the bothersome question of "What's the use, then?" Rudeness at this point might well be justified. If sin inevitably frustrates, what is the point of trying? All goals are dreams to be shattered by individual and

²⁷Guthrie, op. cit., p. 13.

²⁸R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, I:13.

corporate wills-to-power; why not wake up now and have done with the illusions that keep us struggling toward mirages?²⁹ These questions point to the necessity of a consideration of the possibilities of man in his socio-political involvement.

III. The Possibilities of Man in His Socio-Political Involvement

When one considers without sentimentality or illusion the limitations imposed upon man and the possibilities offered man, he must make relative distinctions between better or worse. When men are willing to compromise the demand for perfection, political power provides them with a realistic means for the achievement of relative ethical progress. Questionable as it is, political force can affect social change for the better as well as for the worse. Precisely because it is the instrument of the unethical will-to-power which creates injustice, it may have a positive value in the attainment of a more just social structure: power can be controlled and constructively directed only by more power.³⁰

The proper understanding and valid application of power depends above all on the recognition of the ethical

²⁹Gill, op. cit., p. 155.

³⁰Guthrie, loc. cit.

limitations of power-seeking men which were elsewhere described. Because men seek power, it can never be trusted in the hands of one person or group of persons alone. It will inevitably be abused unless it is carefully controlled and dispersed through a system of checks and balances.

Political power provides the means for the achievement of a relatively ethical society, and reason, though limited and frail, is able to provide the relative ethical goal and regulate the choice of means. Reason can at best partially transcend self-interest and consider the interests of others. The fact that men can devise political orders which resolve conflicts without destroying one or the other conflicting parties is evidence of reason's ability to partially transcend self-interest and egotism. The goal which Niebuhr sees reason to set is justice. Justice is, for Niebuhr and the realist school of socio-political thought, primarily a rational concept and not essentially a moral or religious one. Rational justice does not seek to abolish power, but attempts only to impartially regulate the use of it. It seeks to develop an armistice between or harmony of competing social interests and forces.³¹

The achievement of justice is dependent upon a relative equality of power (or balance of power). Niebuhr

³¹Ibid., pp. 34-36.

assumes that where vast disproportions of power exist, justice is a mockery--it becomes the will of the mighty. The system of order resulting from one individual, group, or nation having a disproportionate amount of power in a given situation is merely the law of the ruling powers which never fully consider the claims of the weaker. Where a relative equality or balance of power exists, all contenders get a hearing because the power of an opponent always tends to check an individual's, group's, or nation's aggressive pretensions and claims. The assumption here is that the needs of the whole are better met when the whole community (local, national, or international) is forced to consider the claims of its various parts. Niebuhr understands socio-political situations, oriented around a balance of power, to be morally and ethically inferior to a community of love; but he also understands that corrupt human nature apparently will require a rough balance to the end of time. To imagine otherwise appears to put one in the position of being victimized by illusions concerning man and the possibilities of social and political progress.³²

Niebuhr is very much aware that Christians are formally taught absolute and demanding ethical and moral ideals in the church. He sees these teachings as being

³²Edward John Carnell, The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Erdmans, 1950), p. 247.

centered around uncompromising, self-giving, non-resistant love as the true ethical norm. Niebuhr is also a political thinker of the first order and is very much aware that the world of politics is governed not by love but by pride, power, and self-interest. He has given himself the task of relating the Christian faith to the world of political, economic, and social life. As has already been stated, Niebuhr has sought to discover the relationship between the absolute ethical and moral demands of the Christian faith, and the ambiguous ethics and morality of the power and self-interest dominated socio-political and economic processes. He does not see the goal of rational justice, defined as freedom and equality, as being merely one among many possible goals under the conditions of human limitation and sin. As an ideal, he sees rational justice as being second only to sacrificial, self-giving love (agape). Equality is love in terms of the logic of limited and sinful man:

If the obligation to love the neighbor as the self is to be reduced to a rational calculation, the only guarantee of the fulfillment of the obligation is to grant to the neighbor that which equals what the self claims for itself.³³

Rational justice is related to love in the following sense:

³³R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, II:254.

Equality as the ideal of justice implicitly points toward love as the fixed norm of justice; for equal justice is the approximation of brotherhood under the conditions of sin.

. . . It is no longer love in the ecstatic dimension. For the principle of equality allows and requires that the self insist upon its rights and interests in competition with the rights and interests of others. Therefore equal justice is on the one hand the law of love in rational form and on the other hand something less than the law of love.³⁴

The primary contribution of Christian ethical teaching is precisely its uncompromising absolute norm of self-giving love which alone is an adequate norm for human nature and which radically calls into question and judges all relative ethical achievement. This absolute standard prevents the necessary ethical compromises involved in effective and responsible socio-political activity from ending in complete relativism with no ethical standards at all. Relative justice can be achieved only when it is relative to a fixed norm. It must aim at something more than justice if it would obtain justice. Although any complete or even near complete realization of the ideal of self-giving love is impossible, it nevertheless provides a vision which will not allow men to be satisfied with whatever measure of justice they have obtained. It is the necessary stimulus for continually renewed striving for a more ethical society.³⁵

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Guthrie, op. cit., pp. 37-38.

IV. Comments on Political Science Methodology and Theology

Niebuhr and Morgenthau are without question the leading thinkers in the realist school of socio-political thought and analysis. That which most strongly commends their anthropological approach to political science is their common desire to maintain the organic relationship between political theory and action. Both have attempted to maintain the relationship between what ought to be and the actual realities of political activity and action. The assumption here is that political theory must be developed within the continuum provided by what appears to be the actual possibilities and limitations of man in his socio-political involvement. All discussion of what ought to be must be held in tension with what can be.

Niebuhr and Morgenthau seek to describe recurring political phenomena and then interpret those phenomena in terms of political theory.³⁶ Morgenthau credits Niebuhr with pointing out time and time again that "history is a mass of events which, in certain respects, show uniformities from which certain general principles can be

³⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, The Structure of Nations and Empires (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 3; Hans J. Morgenthau, "The Intellectual and Political Functions of a Theory in International Relations," The Role of Theory in International Relations, ed, Horace V. Harrison (New York: Norstrand, 1964), p. 102.

derived."³⁷ It is important here to note that both thinkers see the problems of the political sphere as being repetitious because they are "projections of human nature in human society."³⁸ After reviewing the past and having attempted to peer into the future, they see human nature reproducing the same political problems for each new generation. Apparently these projections of human nature cannot be solved by education, refinement, development, freeing from perverting institutions, conditions, or influences. It would seem that "they can only be restated, manipulated, and transformed, and each epoch has to come to terms with them anew."³⁹ The repetitious nature of the problems and issues demanding understanding by political science allows the political thinker to develop certain objective laws of politics. These objective laws have their roots in human nature.

Morgenthau divides schools of political theory into two broad categories. One school sees man as being fundamentally good and in need primarily of development,

³⁷Hans J. Morgenthau, "The Influence of Reinhold Niebuhr in American Political Life and Thought," Reinhold Niebuhr: A Prophetic Voice in our Time, ed, Harold R. Landon (Greenwich, Conn.: Seabury Press, 1962), p. 109.

³⁸Morgenthau, Dilemmas of Politics, p. 47.

³⁹Ibid.

rescuing from obsolescent or evil social and political institutions, and enlightenment as to the social and political good. This school trusts in education, reform, theorizing, and the sporadic use of force to remedy such defects. The second school, the school which Niebuhr and Morgenthau helped to develop, believes the social world to be imperfect from an ethical and rational point of view and as being so as the result of forces inherent in human nature. This school assumes that to improve the social order one must work with these forces and not against them. Here theoretical concern is with human nature as it actually is, and with the historic processes as they actually take place.

Professor Morgenthau has few kind words for efforts he sees as divorcing political theory from political action. He understands himself to be set apart from much of the presently fashionable theorizing about political processes.⁴⁰ Morgenthau sees in the Lasswell and Kaplan study, Power and Society: A Framework for Political Inquiry, an example of excessively abstract theorizing about political activity.⁴¹

⁴⁰Morgenthau, "The Intellectual and Political Functions of a Theory in International Relations," The Role of Theory in International Relations, p. 104.

⁴¹Harold D. Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan, Power and Society: A Framework for Political Inquiry (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950).

He sees a "retreat into the trivial, the formal, the methodological, and the purely theoretical, the remotely historical--in short the politically irrelevant"--in such abstract theorizing.⁴² Morgenthau explains that this sort of abstract inquiry becomes "the protective armor which shields political science from contact with the political reality of the contemporary world."⁴³ Much current theorizing about political processes is all but totally unhistoric. It seems intent on reducing political science to a system of abstract propositions all but divorced from empirical reality:

That divorce also illuminates a tendency, common not only to all methodological endeavors in the social sciences but to general philosophy as well, to retreat ever more from contact with the empirical world into a realm of self-sufficient abstraction. . . . General sociological theory is dominated by it, and it has left its impact also upon political science. The new scholastic dissolves the substance of knowledge into the processes of knowing; he tends to think about how to think and to conceptualize about concepts, regressing even further from empirical reality until he finds the logical consumption of his endeavor in mathematical symbols and formal relations.⁴⁴

Because of the nature of the transcendent ethical norm which holds the church's allegiance, many Christians are tempted to believe that because they ought to love, they in fact are capable of living agape-centered lives

⁴²Morgenthau, Dilemmas of Politics, p. 31.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 19.

generally devoid of aggressive power-seeking behavior. Due to the fact that Christians in all ages have succumbed to this temptation, the Niebuhr-Morgenthau insistence that political theory must develop within the continuum provided by what appears to be the actual social and political limitations of men is most helpful to churchmen seeking guidance in the political arena. It has already been said that whatever one may say about the residue of the divine image of man, as the positive side of human nature, or of the direct or indirect influence of God's grace through Christ upon contemporary humanity, he can say with certainty that separate or united they do not cancel the sinful pride, self-centeredness, and power-seeking of contemporary man--even the best intentioned of the current crop of churchmen. It would seem that Niebuhr is right when he says that as far as the new man's intentions are governed by self-giving love, he is sanctified; but insofar as his actions are concerned, he needs God's forgiveness, God's justification.

The new self is the Christ of intention rather than of actual achievement . . . It is the self only by faith, in the sense that its dominant purpose and intention are set in the direction of Christ as the norm. It is the self only by grace in the sense that divine mercy imputes the perfection by Christ, and accepts the self's intentions for achievement.⁴⁵

What Niebuhr is saying here is that men are justified by

⁴⁵R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, II:114.

divine acceptance of their intentions to live in accord with the norm of sacrificial love rather than by their ambiguous achievements. It must not be concluded that there are no fruits of faith and sanctification, but these fruits, as actual human and historical achievements, are tenuous, limited, and partially sinful. The most important actual result of sanctification in the socio-political sphere is the attitude which Niebuhr sums up in the following sentence: "Sanctification in the realm of social relations demands recognition of the impossibility of perfect sanctification."⁴⁶

If taken seriously but not literally, Christian teaching concerning eschatology can be of assistance to Christians perplexed by the ambiguity of motive and accomplishment which accompanies political involvement. This teaching tells us that men are not to think it possible to escape sin and contradiction in what they seek to accomplish through their political and social activity. As Christians, we are allowed by these teachings to see anew that our sin and failure are overcome only on the divine level of perfection. The Gospel eschatology is relevant to our efforts to serve God and our fellows through participation in the complex and often frustrating

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 247.

world of politics. Hans Hofman provides a helpful closing statement concerning this relevance:

The Last Judgment does not annul good and evil, but for the first time gives proof that good means the fulfilling of the will of God with all our might and our full possibility, and in this world; that evil consists in the misuse of our capacities for our fulfillment against the will of God and consequently also against our fellowmen. The meaning of human existence as ordained by God in creation is wholly and finally revealed. The judgment is not upon the amount of human achievement or lack of achievement, but upon man's willingness or unwillingness to allow all of himself to be incorporated into the loving, redeeming will of God and into service to his neighbor. The mercy of God in the Last Judgment means that the being and action of man when he is bound to the living-giving God are life-saving and accepted by God; man's self-will which destroys life and community is damned.⁴⁷

⁴⁷Hans Hofman, The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), p. 229.

CHAPTER V

PROVISIONAL PROPOSITIONS FOR POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE URBAN CONTEXT

With certain information and presuppositions behind us, a set of provisional propositions for Christians involved in urban political situations marked by decentralized legal authority and political power can be outlined.

I. Necessary Checks and Balances

An adequate urban "political" structure will provide checks and balances of sufficient strength to force groups to acknowledge the rights and interests of other groups which would co-exist with them in the framework of a particular urban governmental form.¹

A political structure of justice will allow freedom for new social and political groupings to develop and build their power. The sort of group which should not be allowed to develop is one which would destroy the checks and balances which seek to discipline its corporate will-to-power and would become all-powerful by denying power and

¹The concern here is with political structures, as opposed to legal governmental forms. Political structures are those unofficial but effective structures created by the piecing together of legal authority and the matching of special interests, power, and influence.

influence to other groups. That is to say, all manner of groups with differing notions of the objective social and political good can be tolerated as long as they do not seek to destroy the regulative principle of freedom and equality for all corporate groups to participate in the urban process of decision-making, and as long as they do not attempt to destroy the checks and balances that make possible the partial realization of the informing principle.

The desirable political structure will provide a means by which the interaction between power-seeking groups can be regulated and disciplined; the end of such being that each group is forced to take into consideration the interests and claims of other groups. The guiding assumption here is that the needs of the whole are better met when the whole community is forced to consider the claims of its various parts.

The actual form of checks and balances in unofficial political structures is always problematic. If a political structure does not have effective checks and balances, it is the duty of churchmen to join with other civic minded citizens to improvise new checks and balances. This may well involve the creation of new political organizations or the infiltration and transformation of existing organizations and groupings having political power and influence. Infiltration and transformation of governmental entities

possessing legal authority may also be an appropriate method of restoring checks and balances. It is also possible that churchmen will deem it necessary to maneuver in a fashion as to attempt to gain control of those corporate groups seeking to dominate and deny the freedom of other groups to participate in the political processes of decision-making.

The biblical view of the sinfulness of all men constitutes a warning against all unrestrained forms of power--whether it be the power of the business community, the legislature, the courts, the executive branch of government, labor unions, or even the majority itself. Effective checks upon all human concentrations of power are needed, not because power itself is evil, but because sinful men tend to use power as an instrument of injustice. The greater the power, the greater the possibilities of injustice become.² Since God alone is omniscient, every individual's or group's knowledge is partial. No individual or collective, however intelligent or good intentioned, is wise enough to foresee all the consequences of action or to plan for every eventuality in the midst of complex and conflicting forces. Therefore all knowledge and

²E. C. Gardner, "The Role of Law and Moral Principles in the Ethical Life," Religion in Life, XXVII (Spring, 1959), 323.

opinion must be open to effective challenge.³

II. Adequate Political Structure

An adequate urban political structure promotes the matching of corporate self-interests, but also provides the means by which to regulate this matching so that the wishes of one alliance of interests does not dominate the affairs of a whole community in an unchallengeable way.

A political structure of justice will always be open in the sense that the power of all alliances of interests can be broken and new alliances can be formed. That is to say, the power of all combines of interests can ultimately be broken. In the desired situation, all power created by the matching of self-interest, influence, and power and the piecing together of legal authority is understood as being temporary. In this open situation, no individual, group, or combination of groups can claim finality. Churchmen, then, will act in pragmatic ways to promote an open urban political situation.

In contrast to totalitarian equality which reduces all individuals and groups except the ruling elite to the same level of impotence before the power of the state, the political equality suggested by this rationale raises all

³John M. Swomley, "The Right to Dissent," The Christian Advocate, XI (February, 1966), 7.

citizens and groupings of citizens to the level of potential rulers. Equality here is equality in freedom. In it, equality, freedom, and power are one; for equality understood in this way denies both the permanent possession of political power and subjection to it. By making power at least potentially accessible to all, it makes all both potentially powerful and free.⁴

This understanding of the regulative principle of equality and freedom allows the Protestant principle to work in such a way as to rid the city of potentially profane corporate claims to finality in a manner which avoids the violent revolutionary mode of reaction to sinful corporate claims. A ruling group which seeks wholly to dominate a social situation and to perpetuate modes of operation and ways of problem solving beyond the point of their adequacy is, due to man's capacity to transcend and analyze, most often subject to direct and sometimes violent challenge and revolt. In the political situation marked by an effective set of checks and balances, the Protestant principle is able to work and rid the situation of the profane claim through forms which promote more responsible action less apt to be violent or extreme.

⁴Hans J. Morgenthau, The Purpose of American Politics (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), p. 32

Though it is not possible to go into the subject at length, it seems wise to acknowledge Niebuhr's warnings to the church that it must be aware that its insights into specific social and political problems are limited and that the church in the past has often described the social and political good in terms of its own self-interest.⁵ Any claims of sanctity for specific social and political insights and programs must be made with great care:'

The sad experiences of the Christian history show how human pride and spiritual arrogance rise to new heights precisely at the point where the claims of sanctity are made without due qualification.⁶

If the church takes this warning seriously, it will accept the fact that it too must be subject to the checks and balances which regulate the power and influence of other organizations in the desirable urban political structure.

III. Central Coercive Power

To help produce and maintain the necessary equilibrium between the various corporate interests existing within a given urban political situation, there must be a central coercive and organizing power.

That power is government. In the urban situation marked by decentralized legal authority and political power,

⁵Reinhold Niebuhr, Man's Nature and His Communities (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), p. 32.

⁶Ibid.

this central power is very often the unofficial government or political structure created by political processes. Political life in a healthy and democratic urban political situation consists principally of two factors: the central organizing power and the equilibrium of power. One of the primary tasks of the central power is to maintain the open political situation discussed above. When and if a monopoly of power and advantage is gained by certain portions of an urban community, the central power must use every coercive device at its command to create a new balance of power and restore an open political and social state of affairs. This re-balance will allow the slighted groups to participate more freely and fully in the life of the whole community. It is the duty of churchmen to participate in the political life of American cities in order to help the various central urban organizing powers to play the role just described.

IV. Autonomous Central Powers

At the same time, there must be sufficient power in the autonomous and yet related "private" power centers to make for resistance to the central organizing power.

Because the central organizing power can also make sinful claims to finality, there must be sufficient power in centers outside the central power to check such claims. Further, the central power may become the exclusive tool of

a particular combination of interests (as in Dallas) and there must be sufficient outside power to check such take-overs of government. Churchmen must do that which is necessary in order to thwart the efforts of a particular set of interests to make the central organizing power exclusively their instrument.

V. Centralizing Power

According to this rationale, the urban political process which promotes the limited centralization of power and authority is both desirable and necessary.

As we have seen, a strong central organizing power is necessary for a relatively just urban political situation. In cities marked by decentralized legal authority and political power, the political process of centralizing authority and power must take place in order to have an effective central organizing and coercive power. In view of the extreme fragmentation of power and authority in many American cities, the alternative to the political process of developing the central power's ability to decide and act is one form or another of urban anarchy.

The political process, as the means of centralizing power and authority, is absolutely necessary if a number of American cities and metropolitan areas are, in the reasonably near future, to have the ability to make decisions and

effectively act on the basis of these decisions. Certainly the diffuse nature of power and authority which apparently characterizes many larger American cities provides potential checks and balances galore upon individual and corporate self-interest and will-to-power. The fact that so many fragments of power and authority exist in our cities makes possible the use of one or more of these fragments as a base of operation for dissent or rebellion against the current ruling alliance of power and self-interest. Despite all the ambiguities involved, churchmen should affirm both the necessity and merit of the political method of centralizing influence, authority, and power for effective decision-making. Furthermore, they should be aware that it may well be their duty to seize one or more of the fragments of authority and power for use as a base of operation for protest against or defiance of overly dominating combinations of power and self-interest.

Church structure itself may, in some cases, have to be utilized as a base of protest and influence. The church as an institution can bring, when necessary, organizational resources to the task of developing power for the correction of the idolatries that often go with power. Certainly the church needs both clergymen and laymen who will identify themselves with the efforts of the poor and the disadvantaged to gain power, and with it the ability to participate

in the political process of decision-making.⁷ This sort of identification is needed to balance the thousands of ministers and millions of laymen who, implicitly, give their blessings to the way the strong maintain their power.⁸

Churchmen must realize that those disadvantaged groups outside the decision-making process may, in the course of developing their political power, have to resort to such means as demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, and so forth. In fact, they may have to run the risk of initiating events which may ultimately lead to violence. The outsiders are always at a disadvantage when it comes to the choice of means by which they seek to gain admission to the decision-making circles. They face covert power, or established forms of power. The established forms of power are no less

⁷ Bayard Rustin, "From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement," Commentary, XIII (February, 1965), 25-31. It must be realized that certain minority groups in America (Negroes, Latin Americans, American Indians, Appalachians, etc.) have so profound a history of disadvantage that they must press for more than simple legal equality. They must, for example, seek more than an equal amount of public and private funds for programs designed to help them become truly competitive and equal. Many minority group people are untrained for meaningful participation in the automobile age, much less the space age. If they fail to receive more than an equal amount of public services and private aid, they may well become the first permanent American lower class. A permanent lower class would deny the equal opportunity of all citizens for upward mobility.

⁸ John C. Bennett, "The Church and Power Conflicts," Christianity and Crisis, XXV (March 22, 1965), 5.

coercive because they get their way with less obvious uses of power. Such power is exercised by the all but automatic enforcing of the accepted rules of the American society. Those in power discharge employees; they evict tenants; they refrain from taking any positive remedial steps by dragging their feet. Protection of interests by foot-dragging is often the most pervasive form of power in our cities. Those in positions of power can exercise this form of power in a way that avoids the appearance of naked power. Behind such protection is control of votes, property, corrupted investigators, and many opinion-forming agencies.⁹

The weak, on the other hand, who are trying to put together forms of power and to gain political strength are constantly forced to use means and methods which allow them to be accused of making a disturbance, of risking violence; but their activities in our time have been a relatively weak form of power (in intention nonviolent) against the institutionalized violence of the police system of many a community, against the pervasive intimidation that is the next thing to violence.¹⁰ The churchmen who understand it to be their duty to support the outsiders in their bid for power must be willing to face the scorn of the establishment. They must also be prepared to face the wrath of a

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

Protestant constituency which by and large does not understand the distinction between the overt power of the weak and the covert power of the establishment.¹¹

VI. Political Methods Questioned

The Christian cannot affirm certain political methods of centralizing authority and power.

It has been stated that a process of centralizing power and authority must remain open in order to be desirable. That is to say, it must always be able to provide for the participation of new groups, or slumbering groups becoming politically alive and aggressive (the American Negro community for example), and for new combinations of interests in the political process of decision-making for a city.

This assumption being correct, the method of centralizing power and authority used by business and commercial interests in Dallas is neither desirable nor adequate. This is so because the method is closed. All social, ethnic, and class groupings in the city are not free potentially to participate in civic decision-making. One combination of interests so controls the unofficial political process of centralizing authority and power that no effective challenge can be made to this control. There are no centers of power outside the central organizing power (the Dallas Citizens'

¹¹Ibid., p. 6.

Council) with sufficient strength to challenge the current order. For groups outside the power structure created by the Citizens' Council and their allied organizations, there is not even the possibility of temporary defeat, only defeat. An effective means by which to regulate and discipline the will-to-power of the controlling set of interests has not yet appeared in the Dallas situation.¹²

¹²Richard Austin Smith, "How Business Failed Dallas," Fortune, XLII (July, 1964), 163. There is reason to believe that certain minority groups outside the Dallas power structure actually suffer from exclusion from the political decision-making process. In the case of Dallas' notorious slums, populated mostly by minority group people, the Citizens' Council officially sat on its hands--while a combine of home builders and realtors killed off a public housing program. In a typical West Dallas lot, 100 feet wide by 150 feet long, a 1957 ad hoc slum investigating committee of the Citizens' Council found 102 people living under conditions that resemble a wartime concentration camp. Two low sheds, facing each other, were divided into twenty-four apartments. Sanitary facilities for the 102 people consisted of a row of pit toilets, many of them without doors, all in a condition of "unspeakable filth." These toilets were located close to the living quarters and also close to the water supply. The committee was united in its conviction that the Urban Redevelopment Plan offered the most practical means of slum eradication in West Dallas and elsewhere in the city and that the urgency of the matter permitted no delay in making and adopting plans for getting rid of these blighted areas under the Urban Renewal Act. The Citizens' Council remained unmoved. Despite all the talk of private enterprise tackling the job of slum correction in Dallas, nothing to speak of has been done since then, nor has federal aid been allowed.

Dallas has approximately 22,500 substandard living units. A veteran Dallas real-estate man is reported by Smith as having said that "It's still true in Dallas that the way to give your son a start in life is to let him have thirty or forty shotgun houses. Some of the most prominent members of the church and the power structure own the

VII. The Church as an Institution

The city must see the church as an institution.¹³

A set of provisional propositions has been given for the guidance of Christians involved in urban political situations marked by decentralized power and legal authority. Since provisional propositions are more concrete than a universal ethical principle and less specific than a program which includes specific suggestions of legislation and political strategy, they must be translated into specific plans of action and concrete programs applicable to particular urban political situations. If this translation is to take place in the most effective way, churchmen and urbanites in general must see the church as an institution.

Despite much of the contemporary decrying of the sins of the institutional life of the church, the validity of the following observation made by George Younger cannot be escaped:

The truth of the matter is that the institutional life of the church is a necessary part of its existence. No social organism can come into being without taking some form as an institution in society. The task of

biggest hunks of the slums." A shotgun house is a house whose in-line arrangement of rooms makes it possible for one shotgun blast to sweep through the entire house.

¹³William R. Grace, "The City Must See the Church as an Institution" (paper read at the Bay Area Interim Planning Committee for the West Coast Urban Training Center, San Francisco, August, 1965).

the Christian fellowship is not to deny its institutional nature, but to see that this, like the life of the Christian, is used to bear witness to God's rule and judgment and loving grace. Like its members, the institution itself must live its life in the world as service to its Lord.¹⁴

While Younger is convinced that the city must see the institutional church moving beyond its walls and becoming involved in the issues that most deeply trouble and complicate the lives of its citizens, he is also saying that institutional life is a part of the urban socio-political situation, and churchmen cannot overlook this fact. Whether churchmen like it or not, urbanization and the proliferation of organizations and institutions go hand-in-hand. The issue is really twofold:

- a. Institutional life is the price paid for living in an urban world; and
- b. Christians must learn to minister in the name of Christ through institutional structure and organization.¹⁵

The institutional dimension of the life of the church is inevitable. The church, as an organization, has followed the usual growth patterns of other organizations. Robert Lee has described this pattern in ecclesiastical language:

¹⁴George D. Younger, The Church and Urban Power Structure (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), p. 79.

¹⁵Grace, op. cit.

After the doxology, comes the theology, then the sociology. After the initial religious experience or the original creative impulse (doxology), soon there sets in the need to define and formulate a systematic body of teachings, a codified and articulated set of doctrines (theology); then follows the necessity of preserving and perpetuating the original experience through the organization of community (sociology).¹⁶

Having said that institutionalization is inevitably a part of the life of the church and that urban life demands a high degree of involvement in organizational and institutional life, the possibilities of ministering through the church's own institutional structure and organization in urban political situations must now be discussed.

As emphasized by William Grace, the city must see the institutional church making corporate decisions. In the context of this essay, the city must understand the process by which the church makes decisions about the political sphere:

In order for the church to have any involvement in the (urban political) decision-making process, she must see herself as an institution and learn to make her decisions accordingly. The voice of the individual congregation has just about as much weight as does the individual person. Perhaps, we need to be reminded of what Louis Wirth said long ago: "The individual counts for little (in an urban setting), but the voice of the representative is heard with a deference roughly proportional to the numbers for whom he speaks." Given the polyglot mixture of Protestantism in the city, one can hardly blame the city for not heeding the voice of

¹⁶Robert Lee, "The Organizational Dilemma in American Protestantism," Cities and Churches, ed, Robert Lee (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 222.

a single congregation on any issue. In order for the church to speak and to be a part of the crucial decision-making apparatus of the city, it must learn to make corporate decisions either as denominations or as the Protestant community.¹⁷

To develop a decision-making process which can be understood within and without the church, churchmen must seriously commit themselves to cooperative influence and guidance. The practical result of failure to do so is that the good intentions of churchmen may continue to be lost in an anarchy of cross purposes. The contention here is that if Christianity is going to exert any genuine influence and guidance in the urban political situation, more understandable channels of inter-communication about and discussion of social and political decisions must be developed within local congregations, within the denominational frameworks, and within the developing ecumenical structures. If churchmen are to make common cause with non-churchmen on social and political issues, non-Christians must know who, why, and how the congregation, synod, conference, convention, diocese, or council of churches arrived at the position it seeks agreement upon. People outside the church must be assured that large numbers of churchmen have participated in the decision-making process which produces a decision either to seek a change in or maintain a given

¹⁷Grace, op. cit.

urban political situation. If it is clear that only a few persons within a congregation, denomination, or ecumenical structure actually make the decision to commit the church to this or that course of political action, the church will be dismissed as just another harmless "do good" group without any real committed constituency.

What is being said here is that the church's decision making process concerning social and political matters must be streamlined so that it can be understood by both churchmen and non-churchmen alike. Comprehensive position papers must be developed and people outside the local "inner circles" of Protestantism must understand the process by which these outlines of rationale are developed. For example, it might be wise to replace a given city's council of churches made up of individual congregations with a council of denominations. On one level the number of people involved in the decision-making process would be reduced. Instead of say 300, the number could be reduced to 25 or 30. While in one sense this idea would abbreviate the numbers participating in the making of decisions, it would also unify and make more inclusive the process. Assuming that a city's individual congregations already participate in the denominational processes for making decisions about and taking positions on local social and political issues, there is no need to attempt to create a

new and cumbersome strata of decision-making machinery for the local council of churches. Laymen and pastors can be involved in the process of coming to grips with local socio-political problems and concerns in ways more or less familiar to them.¹⁸ This is but one of many possible ways to streamline the process by which the Protestants in a given city seek to discuss, analyze, and devise courses of action with reference to the urban political sphere of activity.

VIII. Concluding Comments

It has been stated that the political process of centralizing power and authority in urban political situations is both very ambiguous and very necessary for the health of our cities. Hopefully, the necessity of the political method of developing a central organizing power that is both effective and democratic has been clearly delineated. The ambiguity involved in the process may nonetheless still seem distasteful and repulsive to many churchmen. The person who cannot tolerate any form of compromise has no place in the political arena. As has been suggested, the Christian who approaches the political process with a legalistic morality which insists that all tactical compromise involves unforgivable moral sin works

¹⁸Ibid.

from a highly questionable understanding of Christian ethics and citizenship. The uncompromising legalistic view of political activity starts out with the self and the desire to maintain one's own personal purity rather than with God's will and the neighbor's need. This view rests upon

the assumption that one's salvation depends upon the preservation of his personal purity rather than upon the grace of God which accepts the service of those who in love seek to minister to His children's needs.¹⁹

This closing comment in verse is commended to churchmen who dream of situations in which the compromise and ambiguity involved in the urban political process is absent and whose visions of undefiled good keep them from active and purposeful involvement in the political sphere:

We know very well we are not unlucky, but evil,
That the dream of a Perfect State or No State at all,
To which we fly for refuge, is a part of our punishment.
Let us therefore be contrite but without anxiety.
For Powers and Times are not gods
but mortal gifts from God;
Let us acknowledge our defeats but without despair,
For all societies and epochs are transient details,
Transmitting an everlasting opportunity
That the Kingdom of Heaven may come, not in the present
And not in the future, but in the Fullness of Time.
Let us pray.²⁰

¹⁹Gardner, op. cit., p. 335.

²⁰W. H. Auden, For the Time Being (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), p. 116.

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